SHADOW SLAVE

I

CHILD OF SHADOWS

Shadow Slave

Volume-1

Child of Shadows

Chapter-1: Nightmare Begins

A frail-looking young man with pale skin and dark circles under his eyes was sitting on a rusty bench across from the police station. He was cradling a cup of coffee in his hands — not the cheap synthetic type slum rats like him had access to, but the real deal. This cup of plant-based coffee, usually available only to higher rank citizens, had cost most of his savings.

But on this particular day, Sunny decided to pamper himself.

After all, his life was coming to an end.

Enjoying the warmth of the luxurious drink, he raised the cup and savored the aroma. Then, tentatively, he took a small sip… and immediately grimaced.

"Ah! So bitter!"

Giving the cup of coffee an intense look, Sunny sighed and forced himself to drink some more. Bitter or not, he was determined to get his money's worth — taste buds be damned.

"I should have bought a piece of real meat instead. Who knew actual coffee is so disgusting? Well. It's going to keep me awake, at least."

He stared into the distance, dozing off, and then slapped himself in the face to wake up.

"Tsk. What a rip-off."

Shaking his head and cursing, Sunny finished the coffee and stood up. Rich people living in this part of the city were rushing past the small park on their way to work, staring at him with strange expressions. Looking haggard in his cheap clothes and from the lack of sleep, unhealthily thin and pale, Sunny was indeed out of his place here. Also, everyone seemed so tall.

Watching them with a bit of envy, he tossed the cup into a garbage bin.

"I guess that's what three full meals a day would do to you."

The cup missed the bin by a wide margin and fell on the ground. Sunny rolled his eyes in exasperation, walked over and picked it up before carefully putting it in the trash. Then, with a slight grin, he crossed the street and entered the police station.

Inside, a tired-looking officer gave him a quick glance and frowned with obvious distaste.

"Are you lost, boy?"

Sunny looked around with curiosity, noting reinforced armor plates on the walls and poorly hidden turret nests in the ceiling. The officer, too, looked scruffy and mean. At least police stations remained the same wherever you go.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh, no."

Then he scratched the back of his head and added:

"As demanded by the Third Special Directive, I am here to surrender myself as a carrier of the Nightmare Spell."

The officer's expression instantly changed from irritated to wary. He looked the young man over once again, this time with piercing intensity.

"Are you sure you are infected? When did you start showing symptoms?"

Sunny shrugged.

"A week ago?"

The officer became visibly paler.

"Shit."

Then, with a hurried motion, he pressed a button on his terminal and bellowed:

"Attention! Code Black in the lobby! I repeat! CODE BLACK!"

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The Nightmare Spell first appeared in the world a few decades ago. Back then, the planet was just starting to recover from a series of devastating natural disasters and subsequent resource wars.

At first, the emergence of a new disease that caused millions of people to complain about constant fatigue and sleepiness did not attract a lot of attention. But when they started to fall into an unnatural slumber, with no sign of waking up even days later, governments finally panicked. Of course, by then it was already too late — not that an early response could have made any difference.

When the infected started dying in their sleep, their dead bodies turning into monsters, no one was ready. Nightmare Creatures quickly overwhelmed national militaries, plunging the world into complete chaos.

No one knew what the Spell was, what powers it possessed, and how to fight it.

In the end, it was the Awakened — those who survived the first trials of the Spell and came back alive — who put a stop to its rampage. Armed with miraculous abilities earned in their Nightmares, they restored peace and created a semblance of a new order.

Of course, it was only the first of the catastrophes brought upon by the Spell. But as far as Sunny was concerned, none of it had anything to do with him — not until a few days ago, that is, when he first started having trouble with staying awake.

For an average person, being chosen by the Spell was as much of a risk as an opportunity. Kids learned survival skills and fighting techniques in school, on the off chance of being infected. Well-to-do families hired private tutors to train their children in all sorts of martial arts.

Those from the Awakened clans even had access to powerful legacies, wielding inherited Memories and Echoes in their first visit to the Dream Realm.

The richer your family was, the better your chances of surviving and becoming an Awakened were.

But for Sunny, who had no family to speak of and spent most of his time scrounging for food instead of going to school, being chosen by the Spell presented no opportunity at all. To him, it was basically a death sentence.

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A few minutes later, Sunny was yawning while several policemen were busy putting him in restraints. Soon he was fastened into a bulky chair that looked like a weird mix between a hospital bed and a torture device. The room they were in was situated in the basement of the police station, with thick armored walls and a formidable-looking vault door.

Other officers were standing near the walls, with automatic rifles in their hands and grim expressions on their faces.

Sunny did not particularly care about them. The only thing he could think about was how much he wanted to sleep.

Finally, the vault door opened, and a gray-haired policeman walked in. He had a seasoned face and stern eyes, looking like someone who had seen a lot of terrible things in his life. After checking the restraints, the policeman glanced quickly on his wristwatch and then turned to Sunny:

"What's your name, kid?"

Sunny blinked a few times, trying to concentrate, then shifted uncomfortably.

"Sunless."

The old policeman raised an eyebrow.

"Sunless? That's a strange name."

Sunny tried to shrug, but found himself unable to move.

"What's so strange about it? At least I have a name. Back in the outskirts, not everyone even gets one."

After another yawn, he added:

"It's because I was born during a solar eclipse. My mom had a poetic soul, you see."

That's why he got this weird-ass name and his little sister was called Rain… back when she still lived with them, at least. Whether it was the result of poetic imagination or simple laziness, he did not know.

The old policeman grunted.

"Do you want me to contact your family?"

Sunny simply shook his head.

"There's no one. Don't bother."

For a second, there was a dark look on the policeman's face. Then his expression turned serious.

"Alright, Sunless. How long can you stay awake?"

"Uh… not long."

The policeman sighed.

"Then we don't have time for the full procedure. Try to resist for as long as you can and listen to me very carefully. Okay?"

Not waiting for a response, he added:

"How much do you know about the Nightmare Spell?"

Sunny gave him a questioning look.

"As much as anyone, I guess? Who doesn't know about the Spell?"

"Not the fancy stuff you see in dramas and hear in the propaganda broadcasts. I mean how much do you really know?"

That was a hard question to answer.

"Don't I just go into the Dream Realm, kill a few monsters to complete the First Nightmare, receive magic powers and become an Awakened?"

The old policeman shook his head.

"Listen carefully. Once you fall asleep, you will be transported inside your First Nightmare. Nightmares are trials created by the Spell. Once inside, you will meet monsters, sure, but you will also meet people. Remember: they are not real. They're just illusions conjured up to test you."

"How do you know?"

The policeman just stared at him.

"I mean, no one understands what the Spell is and how it works, right? So how do you know that they're not real?"

"You might have to kill them, kid. So do yourself a favor and just think about them as illusions."

"Oh."

The old policeman waited for a second, then nodded and continued.

"A lot of things about the First Nightmare depend on luck. Generally, it shouldn't be overwhelmingly hard. The situation you're in, the tools you have at your disposal and the creatures you have to defeat should be within the range of your abilities, at least. After all, the Spell sets up trials, not executions. You're a bit disadvantaged due to… well… your circumstances.

But kids from the outskirts are tough. Don't give up on yourself just yet."

"Uh-huh."

Sunny was getting more and more sleepy. It was becoming hard to follow the conversation.

"About those "magic powers" you mentioned… you will indeed receive them if you survive until the end of the Nightmare. What those powers will be, exactly, depends on your natural affinity as well what you do during the trial. But some of it will be at your disposal right from the start…"

The voice of the old policeman sounded more and more distant. Sunny's eyelids were so heavy that he was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Remember: the first thing you must do once inside the Nightmare is to check your Attributes and your Aspect. If you get a combat-oriented Aspect, something like a Swordsman or an Archer, things will be easier. If it is reinforced by a physical Attribute, then that's even better. Combat Aspects are the most common, so the probability of receiving one is high."

The armored room was growing dimmer.

"If you're unlucky and your Aspect has nothing to do with combat, don't despair. Sorcery and utility Aspects are useful in their own ways, you'll just have to be smart about it.

There are really no useless Aspects. Well, almost. So just do anything in your power to survive."

"If you survive, you will be halfway to becoming an Awakened. But if you die, you'll open a gate for a Nightmare Creature to appear in the real world. Which means that my colleagues and I will have to deal with it. So… please don't die, Sunless."

Already half-asleep, Sunny felt a bit touched by the policeman's words.

"Or, at least, try to not die right away. The nearest Awakened won't be able to get here for a few hours, so we would really appreciate it if you don't make us fight that thing ourselves…"

'What?'

With that last thought, Sunny finally slipped into a deep slumber.

Everything became black.

And then, in the darkness, a faintly familiar voice rang:

[Aspirant! Welcome to the Nightmare Spell. Prepare for your First Trial…]

Chapter-2: Slave Caravan

Sunny dreamt of a mountain.

Jagged and lonesome, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly, pale light.

On one of the slopes, the remnants of an old road stubbornly clung to the rocks. Here and there, weathered paved stones could be seen through the snow. To the right side of the road, a sheer cliff face rose as an impregnable wall. To the left, a silent black sea of nothingness indicated an endless fall. Strong winds crashed into the mountain over and over again, screaming in powerless rage.

Suddenly, the moon fell over the horizon. The sun rose from the west, streaked across the sky and disappeared in the east. Snowflakes jumped from the ground and returned into the embrace of clouds. Sunny realized that he was seeing the flow of time in reverse.

In an instant, hundreds of years flew by. The snow retreated, baring the old road. Cold shivers ran down Sunny's back as he noticed human bones littering the ground. A moment later, the bones were gone, and in their place, a slave caravan appeared, moving backwards down the mountain in the clamor of chains.

Time slowed, stopped, and then resumed its usual pace.

[Aspirant! Welcome to the Nightmare Spell. Prepare for your First Trial…]

'What… what the hell is this?'

Step. Step. Another step.

A dull ache was radiating through Sunny's bleeding feet as he was shivering from cold. His threadbare tunic was nearly useless against the biting wind. His wrists were the main source of agony: badly hurt by the iron shackles, they sent a sharp pang of pain every time the freezing metal touched his broken skin.

'What kind of a situation is this?!'

Sunny looked up and down, noticing a long chain winding up the road, with dozens and dozens of hollow-eyed people — slaves just like him — shackled to it at small intervals. Ahead of him, a man with broad shoulders and a bloodied back was walking with a measured gait.

Behind him, a shifty-looking guy with quick, desperate eyes was quietly cursing under his breath in a language that Sunny did not know, but somehow still understood. From time to time, armed horsemen in ancient-style armor would pass by, giving the slaves menacing looks.

However you judged it, things were really bad.

Sunny was more bewildered than panicked. True, these circumstances were not like what the First Nightmares were supposed to be. Usually, freshly chosen aspirants would find themselves in a scenario that presented them with a fair amount of agency: they would become members of privileged or warrior castes, with plenty of access to necessary weapons to at least try to tackle any conflict.

Starting out as a powerless slave, shackled and already half-dead, was as far from being ideal as one could imagine.

However, the Spell was as much about challenge as it was about balance. As the old policeman said, it created trials, not executions. So Sunny was pretty sure that, to counter this abysmal start, it would reward him with something good. A powerful Aspect, at least.

'Let's see… how do I do this?'

Remembering popular webtoons he read as a child, Sunny concentrated and thought about words like "status", "myself" and "information". Indeed, as soon as he focused, shimmering runes appeared in the air in front of him. Once again, although he did not know this ancient alphabet, the meaning behind it was somehow clear.

He quickly found the rune describing his Aspect… and, finally, lost his composure.

'What?! What the actual fuck?!'

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Name: Sunless.

True Name: —

Rank: Aspirant.

Soul Core: Dormant.

Memories: —

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows].

Aspect: [Temple Slave].

Aspect Description: [Slave is a useless wretch with no skills or abilities worth a mention. A temple slave is just the same, except much rarer.]

Speechless, Sunny stared at the runes, trying to convince himself that he was maybe just seeing things. Surely, he couldn't be that unlucky… right?

'No useless Aspects my ass!'

As soon as this thought appeared in his mind, he lost the rhythm of his steps and stumbled, pulling the chain down with his weight. Immediately, the shifty guy behind him screamed:

"Whore's bastard! Watch where you're going!"

Sunny hurriedly dismissed the runes, which were only visible to him, and tried to recover his balance. A moment later, he was once again walking steadily — however, not before inadvertently pulling on the chain one more time.

"You little shit! I'm going to kill you!"

The broad-shouldered man in front of Sunny chuckled without turning his head.

"Why bother? The weakling will be dead by sunrise anyway. The mountain will kill him."

A few seconds later, he added:

"It'll kill you and me, too. Just a bit later. I really don't know what the Imperials are thinking, forcing us into this cold."

The shifty guy gasped.

"Speak for yourself, fool! I'm planning to survive!"

Sunny silently shook his head and concentrated on not falling again.

'What a charming pair.'

Suddenly, a third voice joined the conversation from somewhere further back. This one sounded gentle and intelligent.

"This mountain pass is usually much warmer this time of year. We just had really bad luck. Also, I would advise you against harming this boy."

"Why is that?"

Sunny turned his head slightly, listening.

"Haven't you seen the markings on his skin? He is not like us, who fell into slavery due to debts, crimes or misfortune. He was born a slave. A temple slave, to be precise. Not long ago, the Imperials destroyed the last temple of the Shadow God. I suspect that this is how the boy ended up here."

The broad-shouldered man cast a look back.

"So what? Why should we be afraid of a half-forgotten, weakling god? He couldn't even save his own temples."

"The Empire is protected by the mighty War God. Of course they're not afraid to burn down a few temples. But we here are not protected by anything or anyone. Do you really want to risk angering a god?"

The broad-shouldered man grunted, not willing to answer.

Their conversation was stopped by a young soldier riding a beautiful, white horse. Clad in a simple leather cuirass, armed with a spear and a short sword, he looked dignified and noble. To Sunny's irritation, the asshole was really pretty, too. If this was a historical drama, the soldier would definitely be a male lead.

"What is going on here?"

There was no particular menace in his voice, even something resembling concern.

When everyone hesitated, the gentle-voiced slave answered:

"It's nothing, sir. We are just all tired and cold. Especially our young friend over there. This journey is truly too hard for someone that young."

The soldier looked at Sunny with pity.

'What are you looking at? You're not much older than me!' Sunny thought.

Of course, he didn't say anything out loud.

The soldier sighed and took a flask from his belt before extending it to Sunny.

"Bear with it a little more, child. We will stop for the night soon. For now, here, drink some water."

'Child? Child?!'

Due to his thin body and small stature, both caused by malnourishment, Sunny was often mistaken for someone younger. Usually, he didn't hesitate to use it to his advantage, but now, for some reason, being called a child really irked him.

Still, he was really thirsty.

He was just about to take the flask when a whip cracked in the air, and suddenly Sunny was in a world of pain. He stumbled, once again pulling on the chain and causing the shifty slave behind him to curse.

Another soldier, this one older and angrier, stopped his horse a few steps back. The whip that sliced the back of Sunny's tunic open and drew blood belonged to him. Without even glancing at the slaves, the older soldier pierced his younger colleague with a disdainful glare.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The young soldier's face darkened.

"I was just giving this boy some water."

"He'll receive water with the rest of them once we camp!"

"But…"

"Shut your mouth! These slaves are not your friends. Understood? They're not even people. Treat them like people and they'll begin imagining things."

The young soldier looked at Sunny, then lowered his head and put the flask back on his belt.

"Don't let me catch you making friends with slaves again, newbie. Or next time it will be your back tasting my whip!"

As if to illustrate his intention, the older soldier cracked his whip in the air and rode past them, radiating threat and anger. Sunny watched him go with well-concealed malice.

'I don't know how, but I will watch you die first.'

Then he turned his head and glanced in the direction of the younger soldier, who was falling behind with his head still lowered.

'And you, second.'

Chapter-3: The Strings of Fate

For a few minutes after that, Sunny was in a dark mood. But then he pulled himself out of it and inhaled deeply, trying to enjoy the fresh air. Indeed, air like that was hard to come by in the real world: micro dust and other pollutants made it rough and unpleasant, not to mention the general stench of the outskirts.

In the better parts of the city, sophisticated filtration systems worked diligently — however, filtrated air tasted sterile and stagnant. Only the very rich had access to truly pleasant breathing.

And here he was, able to enjoy an unlimited amount of pristine, delicious air like a second-generation chaebol.

'Truly, being chosen by the Spell has its benefits.'

If only there was no dreadful cold, his feet did not ache, and his wrists and back were not in agony!

The slave caravan slowly dragged itself up the mountain, with more and more slaves stumbling and periodically falling to the ground. A couple of times, those who could not walk anymore were taken off the chain and unceremoniously tossed off the road, down into the abyss that loomed to the left of it. Sunny watched them fall with a bit of compassion.

'Poor fellows. Rest in peace, you pitiful souls.'

All in all, he was in good spirits.

It was a bit strange to feel good amidst this disaster of a Nightmare, but, thankfully, Sunny had time to prepare himself for this eventuality. When the symptoms of the Spell first appeared, he did not handle it well. Dying before you even turn seventeen was not something one could easily cope with.

But, in the end, it only took Sunny several days to come to terms with it. After visiting his parents' makeshift resting place — well, actually, since he was too poor to afford

even the cheapest slot in the remembrance facility, it was just two lines carved into an old tree — and adding a third line for himself, Sunny suddenly became relaxed and carefree.

After all, he didn't have to worry about earning money, finding food, protecting himself and planning for the future anymore. Once the worst that could happen had already happened, what else was there to fear?

So, becoming a slave and slowly freezing to death was not that much of a shock.

Besides, he knew that cold would not kill him — simply because he had already seen what fate was awaiting the caravan further up the mountain. The picture of piled bones littering the ground was still fresh in his mind. Most likely, it was a pack of monsters that were going to do the caravan in… and by the look of it, the attack was going to take place in a matter of hours, not days.

So he still had a chance.

Using the opportunity, Sunny decided to take another look at his status and summoned the runes again. The last time he was too outraged by the Aspect and didn't study the Attributes well. While not as important as one's Aspect, the Attributes were often the deciding factor between life and death.

They represented one's natural traits and affinities, sometimes even providing passive abilities and effects.

[Fated] Attribute Description: "The strings of fate wrap tightly around you. Unlikely events, both good and bad, are drawn by your presence. There are those who are blessed, and there are those who are cursed… but rarely both."

[Mark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "You bear a faint scent of divinity, as though someone briefly touched by it once, a long time ago."

[Child of Shadows] Attribute Description: "Shadows recognize you as one of their own."

'Hmmm… Interesting.'

Sunny quickly recognized the first attribute, [Fated], as the main culprit of his predicament. At first glance, it seemed to indicate that he was destined for a certain fate — to die miserably and vanish without a trace, for example. But after reading the

description, he realized that being fated actually just meant that improbable things had a higher chance of occurring when he was around.

'I guess this is how I managed to receive one of the super rare useless Aspects — and a weird variant of it, at that!'

If [Fated] was his innate Attribute, then the other two came from the [Temple Slave] Aspect. [Mark of Divinity] was more a less straightforward — it was supposed to allow passage into certain sacred places inside the Dream Realm and enhance several types of sorcery. Since there were no sacred places in sight and Sunny's Aspect had nothing to do with sorcery, it was useless, too.

[Child of Shadows] was a stranger one. He had never heard of it and had no idea what it was supposed to do — at least not until the sun hid behind the mountain and the sky began to darken. To his surprise, Sunny found himself able to see perfectly in the darkness, as though it was still as bright as day.

This ability alone was nothing to scoff at, and it was quite possible that shadows would reward him with some other, yet unknown, gifts.

'Finally something good. I wonder if…'

"Stop the caravan! Prepare to camp!"

Following the head soldier's order, the slaves stopped and fell to the ground, shivering and exhausted. The small clearing where the road widened was somewhat protected from the wind by a protruding mass of rock, but it was still too cold to rest with ease.

The soldiers got busy herding the slaves into a tight circle, forcing them to share warmth, and lighting up a large bonfire in the center of the camp — although not before tending to their horses. The heavy wagon carrying food, water and other cargo, to which the main chain was firmly affixed, was pushed forward to block the wind.

While looking around, Sunny noticed the young soldier from before watching the mountain with a complicated look on his face.

'What a weirdo.'

Soon, the bonfire was blazing. The stronger slaves tried to find their way closer to the fire, while the weaker ones, like Sunny, were forced to sit at the outer end of the circle, with their backs freezing in the cold. Of course, any movement was encumbered by the fact that they were still shackled to the chain.

That's why the familiar broad-shouldered slave ended up just where he started despite all of his efforts to get closer to the flame.

"Damn Imperials!" he hissed, clearly irritated.

The soldiers walked among the slaves, giving them water and food. Sunny, just like everybody else, received a few sips of icy water and a small piece of rock-hard, moldy bread. Despite its unappetizing look, he forced himself to eat the whole thing, just to be left as hungry as he was before.

By the looks of it, he wasn't the only one.

The shifty slave that had been walking behind him looked around in anguish.

"By all the gods, they used to feed me better even in the dungeons!"

He spat on the ground, desperate.

"And most of us innocent men in the dungeon were there waiting to visit the gallows, too!"

A few steps away from them, where the paved road ended and sharp rocks began, a scattering of bright-red berries were growing from the snow. Sunny had noticed them before, clustering here and there along the road, and even noted how pretty those resilient things looked contrasted against the white. The shifty slave's eyes glistened as he tried to crawl towards the berries on all fours.

"I would advise against eating those, friend."

It was the gentle-voiced slave again. Sunny turned around and finally saw him in the flesh for the first time. It was a tall man in his forties, lean and strangely handsome, with a dignified look of a scholar. How a man such as him ended up a slave was a mystery. Yet there he was.

"You and your advice again! What?! Why?!"

The scholar smiled apologetically.

"These berries are called Bloodbane. They grow in the places where human blood was spilled. That's why there's always a lot of them along the slave trade routes."

"So what?"

The older man sighed.

"Bloodbane is poisonous. A few berries might be enough to kill an adult man."

"Curses!"

The shifty slave flinched back and glared at the scholar.

Sunny did not pay them a lot of attention.

Because, while looking around, he finally recognized the site of the camp as the place where, in his vision at the start of the Nightmare, the bones of the slaves were buried under the snow. And he was willing to bet that whatever it was that killed them all was going to happen soon.

As if to answer his thoughts, a thundering noise rang from above.

And in the next second, something massive came crashing from the sky…

Chapter-4: Mountain King

Turning in the direction of the thundering noise, many slaves raised their heads — only to see rocks and heavy shards of ice raining on them from above. They instantly panicked, lurching away in a cacophony of screams. Shadows happily danced on black stones as, entangled by the thick chain, those slaves fell to the ground and pulled others with them.

Sunny was one of the few that remained upright, mostly because he was ready for something like this to happen. Calm and collected, he gazed at the night sky, his Attribute-enhanced eyes piercing the darkness, and took one measured step back. In the next second, a piece of ice the size of a man's torso hit the ground right in front of him and exploded, showering everything around with sharp shards.

Others weren't that quick. As ice and stones continued to rain, many were wounded, and a few even lost their lives. Agonizing wails filled the air.

"On your feet, fools! Get to the wall!"

The veteran soldier — the one who had whipped Sunny a few hours before — was shouting angrily, trying to get the slaves to move towards the relative safety of the mountain slope. However, before anyone could heed his command, something massive came crashing down, sending a tremor through the stones beneath their feet.

It fell right between the caravan and the mountain wall, plunging everything into silence for a few seconds.

At first, it looked like a lump of dirty snow, roughly round in shape and as tall as a mounted horseman. However, once the creature unfurled its long limbs and rose, it towered over the stone platform like a nightmarish omen of death.

'That thing must be at least four meters tall,' Sunny thought, a bit stunned.

The creature had two stumpy legs, an emaciated, hunched torso and disproportionately long, multijointed hands — two of them, each ending with a set of horrifying bone claws, and another two, these ones shorter, ending with almost human-like fingers. The

thing that at first glance looked like dirty snow turned out to be its fur, yellowish-grey and ragged, thick enough to stop arrows and swords.

On its head, five milky, white eyes regarded the slaves with insect-like indifference. Beneath them, a terrible maw crowding with razor-sharp teeth was half-open, as though in anticipation. Viscous drool was running down the creature's chin and dripping into the snow.

What unnerved Sunny the most, though, were the strange shapes endlessly moving, worm-like, under the creature's skin. He could see them clearly because, unfortunately, he was one of those unlucky souls closest to the monstrosity, getting a nauseating first-row view.

'Well, that is just… too much,' he thought, stupefied.

As soon as Sunny finished that thought, all hell broke loose. The creature moved, slashing its claws in his general direction. But Sunny was one step ahead: without wasting a single moment, he jumped sideways — as far as the chain allowed — conveniently placing the broad-shouldered slave between himself and the monster.

His quick reaction saved his life, as those sharp claws, each as long as a sword, sliced through the broad-shouldered man a fraction of a second later and sent streams of blood flying through the air. Drenched in the hot liquid, Sunny hit the ground, and his fellow slave — now simply a corpse — fell on him from above.

'Damn! Why are you so heavy!'

Temporarily blinded, Sunny heard a chilling howl and felt an enormous shadow passing over him. Immediately after, a deafening chorus of screams filled the night. Not paying it any attention, he tried to roll the corpse to the side, but was stopped by a forceful lurch of the chain that twisted his wrists and filled his mind with white-hot pain.

Disoriented, he felt himself being dragged a few steps, but then the chain suddenly slackened, and he was able to control his hands again.

'See, things could have been worse…'

Putting his palms against the dead man's chest, he pushed with all the strength he had. The heavy corpse stubbornly resisted all his attempts, but then finally fell sideways, setting Sunny free. However, he didn't get to celebrate this newly found freedom, as his blood suddenly turned to ice.

Because at that moment, with his palms still pressed against the broad-shouldered slave's bleeding body, he clearly felt something wriggling under the dead man's skin.

'You just had to think about how things could get worse, right, you idiot?' he thought, and then flinched back.

Pushing the corpse with his legs, Sunny crawled as far away from it as he could — which was about a meter and a half, thanks to the ever-present chain. He quickly glanced around, noticing a mass of dancing shadows and the silhouette of the monster rampaging amidst the screaming slaves on the opposite end of the stone platform.

Then he concentrated on the dead body, which was starting to convulse with growing violence.

On the opposite side of the corpse, the shifty slave was looking at it with slackened jaw and a horrified expression on his face. Sunny waved to get his attention.

"What are you staring at?! Move away from it!"

The shifty slave tried, but immediately fell down. The chain was twisted between the three of them, pinned down under by the broad-shouldered man's weight.

Sunny clenched his teeth.

Right under his eyes, the corpse was going through a nightmare-inducing metamorphose. Strange bone growths pierced its skin, extending like spikes. The muscles bulged and wriggled, as though trying to change shape. The fingernails were turning into sharp claws; the face cracked and split, bearing open a twisted mouth with one too many rows of bloodied, needle-like fangs.

'This is not right.'

Sunny twitched, feeling a strong urge to empty his stomach.

"Th— the chain!"

The scholarly slave was just a few steps behind the shifty one, pointing at his shackles with a face as pale as a ghost. That remark was far from helpful, but given the circumstances, his shock was understandable. Being shackled was bad enough, but being shackled to such horror was truly unfair.

But Sunny's conclusion that things weren't right did not come from self-pity. He just meant that this whole situation was literally not right: the Spell, mysterious as it was, had its own set of rules. There were rules for what type of creatures could appear in any given Nightmare, too.

Nightmare Creatures had their own hierarchy: from mindless Beasts to Monsters, followed by Demons, Devils, Tyrants, Terrors and, finally, mythical Titans, also known as Calamities. The First Nightmare was almost always populated by beasts and monsters, rarely with a demon mixed in. And Sunny had never, ever heard about anything stronger than a single devil appearing in it.

However, the creature had clearly just created a lesser version of itself — an ability that belonged exclusively to tyrants, the sovereigns of the Nightmare Spell, and those above them.

What was this tyrant even doing in a First Nightmare?

How powerful was that damn [Fated] attribute?!

But there was no time to ponder.

Unfair or not, there was only one person now who could save Sunny — himself.

The broad-shouldered man — what was left of him — slowly rose, his mouth producing strange clicking noises. Without giving him time to fully come to his senses, Sunny cursed and jumped forward, grabbing onto the length of the slackened chain.

One arm of the monster, now fully equipped with five jagged claws, shot forward to meet him, but Sunny sidestepped it with one calculated movement.

What saved his skin this time was not quick reaction, but simple presence of mind. Sunny might not have learned any fancy combat techniques, since his childhood was spent on the streets instead of a school. But the streets, too, were a kind of teacher. He had spent his whole life fighting for survival, quite often literally.

That experience allowed him to keep a cool head on his shoulders in the midst of any conflict.

So instead of freezing or being consumed by fear and doubt, Sunny just acted.

Stepping close, he threw the chain around the monster's shoulders and pulled, pinning its hands to its body. Before the creature, still slow and groggy from its transformation,

could properly react, Sunny wrapped the chain around it several times, barely saving his face from being bitten off by the creature's terrifying maw.

The good thing was, the monster couldn't move its hands now.

The bad thing was, the length of the chain he used to immobilize it was gone, leaving almost no distance between them.

"You two!" Sunny screamed, addressing his two fellow slaves. "Pull on that chain as though your lives depend on it!"

Because they were.

The shifty slave and the scholar gaped at him and then, understanding what he was thinking, started to move. Grabbing the chain from the opposite directions, they pulled as hard as they could, tightening its grip on the monster and not letting it shake loose.

'Great!' Sunny thought.

The monster bulged its muscles, trying to break free. The chain creaked, caught on the bone spikes, as though slowly breaking apart.

'Not so great!'

Without wasting any more time, he threw his hands in the air and caught the creature's neck with the short, thinner chain connecting his shackles together. Then he circled the monster with a quick step and pulled, ending up back to back with it — as far away from its maw as he could.

Sunny knew that he wasn't strong enough to strangle a man with his bare hands — let alone a weird, terrifying mutant like the one trying to eat him. But now, using his own back as a lever and the weight of his whole body to pull the shackles down, he at least stood a chance.

He pulled down with all his might, feeling the monster's body pressing against him, bone spikes brushing against his skin. The monster continued to struggle, clicking loudly and trying to break the chain tying him down apart.

Now it was just a question of what would break first — the chain or the monster itself.

'Die! Die, you bastard!'

Sweat and blood were rolling down Sunny's face as he was pulling, and pulling, and pulling down with as much force as he could muster.

Every second felt like an eternity. His strength and stamina — what little he had to begin with — were quickly running out. His wounded back, wrists, and muscles pierced by the bone spikes were in agony.

And then, finally, Sunny felt the monster's body go limp.

A moment later, a faintly familiar voice rang in the air.

It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

[You have slain a dormant beast, Mountain King's Larva.]

Chapter-5: Broken Chains

[You have slain a dormant beast, Mountain King's Larva.]

Sunny fell to his knees, breathless. His whole body felt as though it just went through a meat grinder: even large amounts of adrenaline could not wash away all the pain and exhaustion. And yet, he was exhilarated.

The satisfaction of killing the larva was so vast that he even forgot to be disappointed about not receiving a Memory — the special item tied to a Dream Realm inhabitant's essence, which was sometimes awarded by the Spell to the triumphant Awakened.

A magic sword or a suit of armor would have come in handy right about now. Damn, he would even settle for a warm coat.

'Three seconds. You can rest for three more seconds,' Sunny thought.

After all, the nightmare was far from over.

A few moments later, he forced himself to come back to his senses and looked around, trying to ascertain the situation.

The larva was dead, which was great. However, he was still tied to it by the damn chain — the shifty slave and the scholar, both pale as death, were busy untangling it to buy the three of them at least some freedom of movement.

Further away, torn bodies and pieces of flesh were lying on the ground. Many slaves were killed. A few had somehow managed to escape and were now running away.

'Fools. They're dooming themselves.'

The chain, as it turns out, was at some point broken in two — that's why it suddenly slackened when Sunny was being dragged by the mass of panicking slaves. If their shackles had a less sophisticated locking mechanism, he could have tried to free himself now. However, each pair was fixed to a specific link: without unlocking them, no one was going anywhere.

The tyrant — Mountain King, presumably — was hidden from sight by the bright glow of the bonfire. However, Sunny could feel its movements due to the subtle tremors spreading through the stones, as well as the desperate screams of those slaves who were yet to perish.

An angry bellow or two could also be heard, indicating that some of the soldiers were still alive, desperately trying to fight the monstrosity off.

What pulled his attention the most, though, was the fact that several of the maimed bodies were starting to move.

'More larvae?'

His eyes widened.

One after another, four more corpses slowly rose to their feet. Each beast looked as disgusting as the first one had, and not a bit less deadly. The nearest was mere meters away from Sunny.

'Damn it all!' he thought.

And then, weakly: 'I want to wake up.'

As strange clicking filled the air, one of the beasts turned its head toward the three slaves and gnashed its fangs. Shifty fell on his ass, whispering a prayer, while Scholar just froze in place. Sunny's eyes darted to the ground, trying to find something to use as a weapon.

But there was not a single thing he could use: full of vitriol, he simply wrapped a length of chain around the knuckles and raised his fists.

'Come at me, you bastard!'

The larva dashed forward with incredible speed in a flurry of claws, fangs, and terror. Sunny had less than a second to react; however, before he could do anything, a nimble figure moved past him, and a sharp sword flashed in the air. The monster, beheaded with one strike, fell gracelessly onto the ground.

Sunny blinked.

'What was that?'

Dumbfounded, he slowly turned his head and looked to his left. Standing there with a valorous expression was the handsome young soldier who had once offered him water. He looked calm and collected, if a little grim. There was not a speck of dirt or blood on his leather armor.

'He is. Awesome,' Sunny thought before catching himself.

'Poser! I mean he's a poser!'

With a short nod, the soldier moved forward to face the remaining three larvae. But after taking a few steps, he suddenly turned around and gave Sunny a long look. Then, with one swift motion, the young warrior took something from his belt and threw it to Sunny.

'Save yourself!'

With that, he was gone to fight the monsters.

Sunny reflexively caught the item and watched the soldier go. Then he lowered his gaze and studied the thing clutched tightly in his hand.

It was a short and narrow iron rod with a straight bend on its end.

'A key. It's a key.'

His heart began to beat faster.

'It's the key to the shackles!'

With one last glance at the fierce battle starting between the young soldier and the larvae, Sunny dropped on one knee and began to maneuver the shackles, trying to get his hand into a suitable position to insert the key. It took him a few tries to understand how the unfamiliar lock worked, but then, finally, there was a satisfying click, and he was suddenly free.

The cold wind caressed his bloodied wrists. Sunny rubbed them and smiled with a dark gleam in his eyes.

'Just you wait now.'

For a moment, visions of violence and revenge filled his head.

"Boy! Over here!"

Shifty was waving his hands in the air, trying to get his attention. Sunny briefly considered just leaving him to die, but then decided against it. There was strength in numbers.

Plus, despite Shifty's previous threats to kill him and overall unpleasantness, Sunny would have felt bad leaving a fellow slave in chains — especially since freeing him would not cost anything.

He hurried over to the other two slaves and quickly unlocked their shackles. As soon as Shifty was free, he pushed Sunny away and did a little dance, laughing like a maniac.

"Ah! Free at last! Gods must be smiling upon us!"

Scholar was more reserved. He squeezed Sunny's shoulder in gratitude and smiled weakly, casting a tense look in the direction of the ensuing fight.

Two of the three larvae were already dead; the third one was missing an arm but still trying to tear its opponent apart. The young soldier danced around it, moving with a graceful fluidity of a natural-born warrior.

"What are you waiting for?! Run!"

Shifty made a move to run away, but was stopped by Scholar.

"My friend, I would…"

"If you say "advise" again, I swear to gods, I will bash your head open!"

The two slaves looked at each other with open animosity. A moment later, Scholar lowered his eyes and sighed.

"If we run away now, we will surely die."

"Why?!"

The older slave simply pointed at the tall bonfire.

"Because without that fire, we will freeze to death before the night is over. Until the sun rises, running away is suicide."

Sunny did not say anything, knowing that Scholar was right. Actually, he realized it right after strangling the larva. No matter how terrible Mountain King was, the bonfire was still their only lifeline in this frozen hell.

It was just as what the broad-shouldered slave, may he rest in peace, had said. There was no need for anyone to kill them, because the mountain itself would do it if given a chance.

"So what?! I prefer freezing to death than being eaten by that monster anyway! Not to mention… ugh… turning into one of those things."

Shifty was pretending to be brave, but there was no conviction in his voice. He glanced at the darkness surrounding the stone platform and shivered before taking a small step back.

At this point, the third larva was long dead, and the young soldier was nowhere to be seen. He had probably gone to join the fight at the other side of the bonfire — leaving the three slaves alone at the mountainside part of the stone platform.

Scholar cleared his throat.

"The monster might be satiated with those it had already slain. It might be defeated or driven away by the Imperials. In any case, if we stay here, we have a chance to survive, however small. But if we run away, our doom will be certain."

"So what do we do?"

Unlike Scholar, Sunny was sure that Mountain King would not be satisfied with killing just most of the slaves. Neither did he believe that a bunch of mortals would really be able to defeat it.

Even if they were not normal people but Awakened, a fight with a tyrant was not something one could easily survive, let alone win.

But if he wanted to live, he had to get rid of that thing somehow.

"Let's go take a look."

Shifty looked at him as though seeing a lunatic.

"Are you insane? You want to get closer to that beast?!"

Sunny stared at him blankly, then shrugged and headed in the direction of the rampaging monster.

Chapter-6: Confronting the Tyrant

Sunny was off to face against a Nightmare Creature. And not any creature, at that, but one of the fifth category — a dreaded, fearsome tyrant. The odds of survival were so low that anyone would have laughed in his face if he were to ever suggest attempting to fight it. If they weren't an Awakened two or three ranks above the creature, of course.

Which Sunny certainly wasn't.

And yet, he had to deal with this Mountain King somehow to avoid an even more miserable death. The ridiculous degree to which the odds were stacked against him from the very beginning of this delayed execution had gotten old a long time ago, so he didn't have any more energy to think about it. What was there to fear, after all? He was already as good as dead. It's not like he could get any deader.

So why worry?

On the other side of the bonfire, things were turning from bad to worse. Most of the slaves were already dead. A few soldiers were still desperately trying to fight the monster, but it was clear that they weren't going to last long. Right in front of Sunny's eyes, the tyrant picked up a dead slave, dragging the chain up with him, and opened its terrifying maw wide.

With one crushing bite, the slave's body was torn in half, leaving only bloodied stumps inside the shackles.

Mountain King's five indifferent, milky eyes stared into the distance as he chewed, streams of blood flowing down its chin.

Seeing that the creature's upper arms were busy, one of the soldiers screamed and lunged forward, brandishing his long spear. Without turning its head, the tyrant extended one of its shorter lower arms, caught the soldier's head in an iron grip and squeezed, crushing the poor man's skull like a soap bubble.

A moment later, the headless body was tossed over the cliff and disappeared into the abyss below.

Shifty doubled over, puking his guts out. Then he shakily rose to his feet and glared at Sunny.

"Well? We've taken a look, now what?"

Sunny did not answer, pensively observing the tyrant with his head slightly tilted to one side. Shifty stared at him some more, then turned to Scholar.

"I'm telling you, old man, the boy is sick in the head. How the hell can he be so calm?!"

"Shhhh! Lower your voice, fool!"

Blood drained from Shifty's face as he slapped himself, covering his mouth with both hands. Then he cast a fearful look in the direction of the tyrant.

Luckily, the abomination was too busy feasting on the slaves — lucky ones who were already dead and unlucky ones who were still alive — to pay them any attention. Shifty slowly exhaled.

Sunny was preoccupied with thinking, measuring his chances of survival.

'How do I get rid of that thing?'

He didn't have any special powers, nor did he have an army ready to bury the tyrant under a mountain of bodies. He didn't even have a weapon to at least scratch the damn bastard.

Sunny moved his gaze and looked past the creature, into the endless darkness of the moonless sky. As he was watching the night, a bright flash streaked in the air and collided with one of the tyrant's arms, bursting into a rain of sparks. The young soldier — Sunny's heroic liberator — had just tossed a burning piece of wood at the monster and was now defiantly raising his sword.

"Face me, devil!"

'A distraction! Just what I needed!'

Because there was no way for Sunny to kill the Mountain King with his own two hands, he had decided to enlist some help. A human wouldn't be up to the task, so instead, he was planning to use a force of nature.

'Since I can't do the bastard in myself, let's make gravity do it for me.'

He was in the middle of thinking over the details of the plan when the young hero's foolish bravado presented an opportunity. Now everything depended on how long the pompous idiot would manage to stay alive.

"Come with me!" Sunny said as he started running toward the far end of the stone platform, where the heavy wagon was perched dangerously close to the edge of the cliff.

Shifty and Scholar shared a dubious look, but then followed, perhaps confusing his calmness with confidence, or maybe divine inspiration. After all, it was a widely known fact that crazy people were often favored by the gods.

Behind them, Hero nimbly ducked under the tyrant's claws, slashing it with the sword. The sharp edge slid ineffectively across the dirty fur, not leaving even a scratch on the creature's flesh. In the next second, the tyrant moved with frightening speed, throwing all four of his hands in the direction of its new, irritating foe.

But Sunny had no way of knowing. He was running with all his speed, getting closer and closer to the wagon. Once there, he hurriedly looked around, checking if there were any larvae close by, and moved to its rear wheels.

The wagon was left at the upper end of the stone platform, where it narrowed and turned back into the road. It was turned sideways to block the wind, with its front facing the mountain wall and its back facing the cliff. There were two large wooden wedges placed under the rear wheels to prevent the wagon from rolling backward. Sunny turned to his companions and pointed at the wedges.

"When I tell you, remove both of them. Then push. Understand?"

"What? Why?"

Shifty stared at him with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Scholar just looked at the wedges, and then at the tyrant.

Hero, miraculously, was still alive. He was weaving between the creature's limbs, always just half a second away from being completely eviscerated. From time to time, his sword flashed in the air, but to no avail: Mountain King's fur was too thick, and his skin too tough to be harmed by mundane weapons. There was a hint of apprehension on the young warrior's face.

All the other soldiers, as far as Sunny could see, were already dead. So he really needed that one to live a little bit longer.

'Don't die yet!' he thought.

To Shifty, he simply said:

"You'll see."

The next moment, Sunny was running again, trying to follow the chain from the brace where it was affixed to the wagon. The thing he was searching for was hard to notice due to all the bodies, blood and viscera littering the stone platform, but for once, luck was on his side. A short amount of time later, he had found what he needed — the torn end of the chain.

Finding the nearest set of shackles, complete with a horribly disfigured body of a slave locked in them, Sunny plopped down on his knees and started to fumble with the key.

There was a muffled scream, and with a sideways glance, he noticed Hero flying through the air, finally caught by one of the tyrant's strikes. Incredibly, the young soldier managed to land on his feet, sliding several meters across the stones. All of his limbs were still in place; there were no terrible wounds on his body, either.

Without skipping a beat, Hero rolled forward, picking up his sword from where it fell on the ground, and then rolled once more, this time sideways, narrowly avoiding a heavy stomp from the creature's foot.

"Rolling?! Who the hell rolls around in this situation?!"

Without any more time to waste, Sunny finally managed to unlock the shackles. Shaking the dead slave out of them, he then promptly locked them once again, this time around the chain itself — ending up with a makeshift slipknot and a loop.

Now everything depended on his resolve, hand-to-eye coordination… and luck.

Turning to Shifty and Scholar, who were still waiting by the wagon, he screamed:

"Now!"

Then, picking up a sizable length of chain, Sunny stood up and faced the tyrant.

Hero spared him half a glance. His eyes lingered on the chain for a moment and then quickly followed it to the wagon. Then, without showing a hint of emotion, the young warrior doubled his efforts, drawing the creature's attention away from Sunny.

'So he's smart, too? What a scam!'

Clearing his head of all unnecessary thoughts, Sunny concentrated on the weight of the chain in his hands, the distance between him and the tyrant, and his target.

Time seemed to slow down a bit.

'Please, don't miss!'

Gathering all of his strength, Sunny spun and threw the chain in the air, as though a fisherman casting his net. The loop opened as it flew, closing in on the position of the fight between Hero and the tyrant.

Sunny's plan was to place the loop on the ground close enough to them that, once one of the tyrant's feet landed in the trap, he could pull on the chain and tighten it around the monster's ankle.

But his plan… failed spectacularly.

Which is to say, it was literally a spectacle.

In the last moment, Mountain King suddenly flinched back, and instead of falling on the ground, the chain loop landed perfectly around its neck. A second later it tightened, acting as an iron noose.

Sunny froze for a moment, not believing his eyes. And then clenched his fists, holding himself back from triumphantly shaking them in the air.

'YES!' he screamed inwardly.

Moments later, the wagon would roll off the cliff, pulling the tyrant down with it. Sunny looked back to make sure, and instantly turned even paler than he usually was.

Shifty and Scholar did manage to remove the wedges from under the wagon's wheels and were now desperately pushing it to the edge of the road. However, the wagon was rolling slowly… very slowly. Much slower than Sunny had anticipated.

He turned to the tyrant, panicking. The creature, surprised by the sudden weight pressing down on its neck, was already raising its hands to tear the chain apart.

Sunny's eyes widened.

In the next second, Hero crashed into one of the tyrant's legs, throwing it off balance — and buying them some time. Sunny was already running to the wagon, cursing loudly in his mind. Reaching it, he threw himself onto the damp wood alongside Shifty and

Scholar, pushing with all the strength left in his rather small, but terribly beaten and enormously exhausted body.

'Roll! Roll, you creaky piece of shit!'

The wagon sped up a little, but was still rather slow in reaching the cliff's edge.

At the same time, the tyrant finally managed to get a hold of the chain tied around its neck, ready to free itself.

Now whether they lived or not was just a question of which thing would happen first.

Chapter-7: Three Slaves and a Hero

'Roll, you creaky piece of shit!'

Sunny pressed himself against the wagon, pushing with all he had. Four powerful oxen that used to pull it were now dead, and instead of them, three tired slaves were trying to do the job. Even with the slope of the road helping them, the speed of the wagon was agonizingly slow. The tyrant, in comparison, was moving much faster.

Pushing Hero back with a deadly swipe of his lower arms, he raised the other two to its neck and tried to grab the chain that was wrapped around it like a noose. However, this time Mountain King's fearsome physique turned into a disadvantage: its long, terrifying bone claws were perfect for tearing flesh apart, but they weren't the best tool for precise manipulations.

It took the tyrant some time to get a hold of the chain without slicing its own neck open.

By then, the wagon was nearly at the edge of the cliff.

'Come on! Just a little bit more!'

What followed happened very quickly. The wagon's rear wheels finally slid from the road, hanging over the dark, seemingly bottomless pit beneath. The creature turned, staring expressionlessly at the three slaves with its five milky, dead eyes. The wagon careened, throwing Shifty and Scholar off their feet, and then froze, balanced precariously on its middle axis.

Sunny was the only one left standing. He cast a last glance at the towering monster, and then slammed his shoulder into the front of the wagon, putting all of his weight behind it.

The wagon finally lost its balance and rolled over the edge, scraping its underside deafeningly against the jagged rocks. Sunny fell forward and landed on his knees, narrowly saving himself from tumbling down the cliff with it. Turning his head to the tyrant, he gave it a wicked smile.

Mountain King made a move to lunge at the scrawny slave, but it was already too late. A moment later, the chain on his neck drew tight, and he was yanked back with tremendous force, flying over the edge of the cliff like a rag doll. The creature fell into the darkness silently, as though refusing to believe that it was defeated by a tiny human.

'Go and die, bastard.' Sunny thought.

Then he took one deep, ragged breath and dropped to the ground, utterly exhausted.

'Is this it? Did I pass the trial?'

He rested on the cold stones, staring at the night sky, and waited for that faintly familiar, but elusive voice to announce his victory. But instead of that, wave after wave of pain that he had earlier chosen to ignore finally started to catch up with his abused body.

Sunny groaned, feeling hurt all over. The skin on his back, slashed by a slaver's whip and pierced by the bone spikes of a newborn larva, especially, was in agony. He was also starting to shiver, once again consumed by the dreadful cold.

'I guess not.'

His thoughts were slow and muddy.

'What else am I supposed to do?'

A dark figure appeared above him. It was Hero, looking calm and as handsome as ever. There were dirt and scratches on his armor, but otherwise, the young soldier appeared to be fine. He extended one arm to Sunny.

"Stand up. You'll freeze to death."

Sunny sighed, accepting that his First Nightmare was not over. Then he clenched his teeth and slowly rose to his feet, ignoring Hero's helping hand.

Around them, there was a scene of utter carnage. Except for the three slaves and Hero, every member of the caravan was dead. Their bodies were littering the ground, horribly maimed or torn into pieces. Here and there, a repulsive carcass of a larva could be seen. Shadows cast by the bonfire were dancing happily across the stone platform, seemingly unperturbed by this morbid view.

Sunny was also too tired to care.

Shifty and Scholar were already up, looking at Hero with weary apprehension. With or without shackles, they were still slaves, and he was still a slave driver. Noticing their tense gazes, the soldier sighed.

"Come closer to the fire, all of you. We need to warm ourselves and discuss what to do next."

Without waiting for their response, Hero turned around and walked away. After hesitating for a few moments, the slaves followed.

A bit of time later, the four of them were seated around the bonfire, soaking up pleasant heat. Shifty and Scholar were close to each other, maintaining a safe distance from Hero. Sunny sat apart from everyone — not because he had a specific reason to distrust one more than the others, but simply because he didn't like people in general.

Growing up, Sunny was always a misfit. It's not that he had never tried to become close with someone, it's just that he seemed to lack the ability. Like there was an invisible wall between him and other people. If he had to put it in words, Sunny would say that he was born without a small, but important gear in his brain that everyone else seemed to possess.

As a result, he was often baffled and stumped by human behavior, and his attempts to imitate it, however diligent, inevitably fell flat. This strangeness made others uncomfortable. In short, he was a bit different — and if there was one thing people hated, it was those different from them.

Over time, Sunny simply learned to avoid getting too close to anyone and settled comfortably into his outcast role. This habit served him well, since it not only made him self-reliant, but also saved him from being stabbed in the back by shady characters on multiple occasions.

That's why he was not thrilled to share the rest of this Nightmare with three strangers. Instead of trying to start a conversation, Sunny sat quietly by himself, lost in thoughts.

After a few minutes, Hero's voice finally broke the silence:

"Once the sun rises, we will gather whatever food and water we can find and go back down the mountain."

Shifty gave him a defiant look.

"Why should we go back? To be put in chains again?"

The young soldier sighed.

"We can go our separate ways once we leave the mountains. But until then, I'm still responsible for your lives. We can't continue up the road since the way over the mountain pass is long and arduous. Without the supplies that were stored on the wagon, your chances of making it are not high. That's why going back is our best hope."

Scholar opened his mouth, planning to say something, but then thought better of it and remained silent. Shifty cursed, seemingly convinced by Hero's rational words.

"We can't go down."

All three of them turned to Sunny, surprised to hear his voice.

Shifty barked a laugh and glanced at the soldier.

"Don't listen to him, your lordship. This boy is, uh, touched by the gods. He's crazy, is what I'm trying to say."

Hero frowned, looking at the slaves.

"The two of you are only alive thanks to this child's bravery. Aren't you ashamed to badmouth him so?"

Shifty shrugged, showing that he wasn't ashamed at all. The young soldier shook his head.

"I for one would like to hear his reasoning. Tell me, why can't we go down?"

Sunny shifted, uncomfortable in the center of everyone's attention.

"Because the monster isn't dead."

Chapter-8: Nothing at All

"Because the monster isn't dead."

These ominous words hung in the silence. Three pairs of eyes widened, staring right at Sunny.

"Why do you say that?"

After thinking about it, Sunny came to the conclusion that the tyrant was, indeed, still alive. His reasoning was pretty straightforward: he did not hear the Spell congratulating him on slaying the creature after it fell off the cliff. Which meant that it was not slain.

But he couldn't explain that to his companions.

He pointed up.

"The monster jumped from an incredible height to land on this platform. Yet it wasn't harmed at all. Why would it be killed by falling off the platform?"

Neither Hero nor the slaves could find a flaw in his argument.

Sunny continued.

"Which means that it's still alive, somewhere down the mountain. So by going back, we will be delivering ourselves into its maw."

Shifty cursed loudly and crawled closer to the bonfire, staring into the darkness with terror in his eyes. Scholar rubbed his temples, mumbling:

"Of course. Why didn't I realize myself?"

Hero was the most stoic of the three. After thinking it over, he nodded.

"Then we go up and over the mountain pass. But that's not all…"

He glanced in the direction where the tyrant had fallen.

"If the monster is still alive, there is a high possibility that it will return here, and then pursue us. Which means that time is of the essence. We will need to move as soon as the sun rises."

He gestured to the torn bodies littering the platform.

"We can't allow ourselves to rest the whole night anymore. We need to gather supplies now. If there was a chance, I would have liked to give these people at least a humble burial after gathering all that we can from them, but alas, fate has decided otherwise."

Hero rose to his feet and brandished a sharp knife. Shifty tensed up and watched the blade carefully, but then relaxed, seeing that the young soldier showed no sign of aggression.

"Food, water, warm clothes, firewood. That is what we need to find. Let us split up and accomplish one task each."

Then he pointed at himself with the tip of the knife.

"I will carve the oxen carcasses to get us some meat."

Scholar looked around the stone platform — most of it drowning in deep shadows — and grimaced.

"I'll look for firewood."

Shifty also glanced left and right, with a strange gleam in his eyes.

"Then I'll go find us something warm to wear."

Sunny was the last one left. Hero gave him a long look.

"Most of our water was stored on the wagon. But each of my fallen brothers was carrying a flagon. Gather as many as you can find."

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Sometime later, far enough from the bonfire to be hidden in the shadows, Sunny was looking for dead soldiers with half a dozen flagons already weighing him down. Shivering in the cold, he finally stumbled on the last broken body clad in leather armor.

The old veteran — the one who had whipped him for trying to accept Hero's flask — was badly injured and dying, but, miraculously, still clinging to life. Horrible wounds were covering his chest and stomach, and he was clearly in a lot of pain.

His time was running out.

Sunny knelt beside the dying soldier and looked him over, searching for the man's flagon.

'What irony,' he thought.

The older man tried to focus his eyes on Sunny and weakly moved his hand, reaching for something. Sunny looked down and noticed a shattered sword lying on the ground not far from them. Curious, he picked it up.

"Are you looking for this? Why? Are you guys like Vikings, longing to die with a weapon in your hands?"

The dying soldier didn't answer, watching the young slave with some unknown, intense emotion in his eyes.

Sunny sighed.

"Well, it might as well do. After all, I promised to watch you die."

With that, he leaned forward and slit the old man's throat with the sharp edge of his broken blade, then threw it away. The soldier twitched, drowning in his own blood. The expression in his eyes changed — was it gratitude? Or hatred? Sunny did not know.

Illusion or not, it was his first time killing a human. Sunny expected to feel guilt or fear, but actually, there was nothing at all. It seemed that, for better or worse, his cruel upbringing in the real world had prepared him for this moment well.

He sat quietly near the old man, keeping him company on this last journey.

After a while, the Spell's voice came whispering into his ear:

[You have slain a dormant human, name unknown.]

Sunny flinched.

'Oh, right. Killing people is also an achievement, as far as the Spell is concerned. They don't usually show this in webtoons and dramas.'

He registered that fact and put it away. But, as it turned out, the Spell wasn't done speaking.

[You have received a Memory…]

Sunny froze, opening his eyes wide.

'Yes! Come on, give me something good!'

Memories could be anything, from weapons to enchanted items. One received from a dormant-rank enemy wouldn't be too powerful, but it was still a boon: weightless and undetectable, able to be summoned from nothingness with a simple thought, a Memory was incredibly useful. What's more, unlike corporeal things, he would be able to bring it back with him to the real world.

The advantage of having something like that back in the outskirts was hard to overestimate.

'A weapon! Give me a sword!'

[... received a Memory: Silver Bell.]

Sunny sighed, disappointed.

'Well, with my luck, what was I expecting?'

Still, this thing was worth investigating. Maybe it had a powerful enchantment, like being able to send out destructive sonic waves or repelling incoming projectiles.

Sunny summoned the runes and concentrated on the words "Silver Bell". Immediately, an image of a small bell appeared in front of his eyes, with a short string of text below.

[Silver Bell: a small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy. Its clear ringing can be heard from miles away.]

'What a piece of crap,' Sunny thought, dejected.

His first Memory turned out to be pretty much useless… like everything else he possessed. He was almost starting to see a theme in how the Spell was treating him.

'No matter.'

Sunny dismissed the runes and then got busy removing the dead man's fur cloak and warm, sturdy leather boots. As an officer, the quality of these clothes was a notch above those of the simple soldiers. After putting them on, the young slave finally felt warm for the first time since the Nightmare began — not considering the short time he had spent near the bonfire.

'Perfect,' he thought.

The cloak was a bit bloodied, but then again, so was Sunny.

He looked around, easily piercing the veil of darkness with his tenebrous eyes. Hero and Scholar were still in the middle of their tasks. Shifty was supposed to be looking for winter clothes, but was greedily pulling rings off the dead men's fingers instead. Unseen to them, Sunny hesitated, considering if he had really thought things through well.

His companions were unreliable. The future was too uncertain. Even the requirements of passing the Nightmare remained a mystery. Any decision he could make would have been a gamble, at best.

Still, he had to make some if he wanted to survive.

Not wasting any more time thinking, Sunny picked up the flagons and sighed.

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They spent the rest of the night sitting with their backs against the bonfire, staring fearfully into the night. Despite the exhaustion, no one could sleep. The possibility of the tyrant coming back to finish the four survivors off was too frightening.

Only Hero seemed to be fine, calmly sharpening his sword in the bright light of the dancing flames.

The sound of the whetstone scraping against the blade was somehow comforting.

At the break of dawn, when the sun had lazily begun to warm up the air, they loaded themselves with all the supplies they'd managed to gather and set out into the cold.

Sunny looked back, taking in the sight of the stone platform for the last time. He had managed to get past the place where the slave caravan was supposed to perish. What was going to happen next? No one could tell.

Chapter-9: Wishful Thinking

There was a problem.

They were planning to follow the road up to the mountain pass and then over it, getting as far away from the scene of the massacre as they could before the night came. However, the road was no more.

At some point during the last months, or maybe even just yesterday, a terrible rockfall occurred, obliterating whole segments of the narrow roadway and making its other parts untraversable. Sunny stood on the precipice of a vast chasm, looking down with no particular expression on his face.

"What do we do now?"

Scholar's voice was muffled by the collar of his scavenged fur cloak. His follower, Shifty, angrily looked around. His gaze stopped at Sunny — a suitable victim to vent his frustration.

"I'll tell you what we need to do! Get rid of some dead weight!"

He eyed Sunny's fine boots and turned to Hero:

"Listen, your lordship. The boy is too weak. He is slowing us down! Plus, he's weird. Doesn't he give you the creeps?"

The young soldier answered with a judgemental frown, but Shifty wasn't done.

"Look! Look how he's glaring at me! I swear to gods, ever since he joined the caravan, nothing had gone right. Maybe the old man was right: the boy is cursed by the Shadow God!"

Sunny struggled to not roll his eyes. It was true that he was unlucky: however, the whole truth was opposite to what Shifty was trying to insinuate. It was not that he had attracted misfortune to the slave caravan; on the contrary, it was because the caravan was doomed to begin with that he had ended up here.

Scholar cleared his throat:

"But I've never said that…"

"Whatever! Shouldn't we get rid of him just in case?! He can't go on for much longer anyway!"

Scholar gave Sunny a strange look. Perhaps Sunny was getting paranoid, but there seemed to be a bit of calculating coldness in the older slave's eyes. Finally, Scholar shook his head.

"Don't be too hasty, my friend. The boy might prove useful later on."

"But…"

Hero finally spoke, putting an end to their quarrel.

"We're not going to leave anyone behind. As for how much longer he'll be able to endure — just worry about yourself."

Shifty clenched his teeth, but then just waved a hand.

"Fine. So what do we do then?"

The four of them looked at the broken road, then down the slope of the mountain, and finally up, where a sheer cliff wall was broken apart by the falling rocks. After a bit of silence, Scholar finally spoke:

"Actually, in the old days, there used to be a path leading to the peak of the mountain. It was sometimes used by pilgrims. Later, the Empire had widened parts of the path and built a proper road on top of it — now leading to the mountain pass instead of the peak, of course."

He looked up.

"The remnants of the original path should still be somewhere above us. If we reach it, we should be able to find our way back to the undamaged section of the road."

Everyone followed his gaze, shifting uncomfortably at the prospect of climbing the treacherous slope. Except for Hero, of course, who remained as calm as a saint.

Due to the rockfall, the slope wasn't an almost vertical wall anymore, but still, the incline was quite sharp.

Shifty was the first one to speak:

"Climb that? Are you insane?"

Scholar helplessly shrugged.

"Do you have a better idea?"

No one did. After a bit of preparation, they began the ascent. Shifty and Scholar stubbornly carried the weapons they had picked up off the dead soldier's bodies, but Sunny, with some regret, decided to leave his newfound short sword behind. He knew that this climb was going to test the limits of their endurance.

The sword might not have seemed to be that heavy right now, but every extra gram of weight was bound to feel like a ton all too soon. As the weakest member of the group, he was already struggling to keep up, so there wasn't a lot of choice. Shedding a few kilograms of iron was the right thing to do.

Walking up the mountain road with the weight of the supplies on his shoulders was already hard enough, but climbing up the mountain itself turned out to be pure torture. Just half an hour later, he felt like his muscles were going to melt, with his lungs on the verge of imploding.

Clenching his teeth, Sunny continued to move forward and up. He had to constantly remind himself to watch his footing, too. On this unstable, icy slope one misstep was enough to send a man tumbling down to his death.

'Just think about something pleasant,' he thought.

But what happy thoughts could he summon?

Failing to come up with something else, Sunny began to imagine what reward he was going to receive at the end of this trial. The boon of the First Nightmare was the most important thing given to an Awakened by the Spell.

Sure, later trials could provide them with more abilities and vastly improve their power. But it was this first one that determined what role an Awakened would be able to play, how great their potential would be, and what price they would have to pay… not to mention giving them the necessary tools to survive and grow in the Dream Realm.

The main benefit of the First Nightmare's Boon was simple, yet possibly the most important: after completing their trial, Aspirants were bestowed with the ability to

perceive, and interact with, Soul Cores. Soul Cores were the basis of one's rank and power. The stronger your Core was, the greater your might would grow.

The same went for Nightmare Creatures, with a deadly caveat that, unlike humans, they could possess multiple cores — a lowly beast had just one, but a tyrant like Mountain King had five. Coincidentally, the only way to improve your Soul Core was to consume Soul Shards scavenged from the corpses of other Dream Realm inhabitants.

That's why Awakened went out of their way to battle powerful Nightmare Creatures despite the risk of death.

The second benefit was less straightforward, but nevertheless vital. After completing the First Nightmare, Aspirants were elevated to the rank of Dreamers — colloquially known as Sleepers — and gained access to the Dream Realm itself. They would enter it on the first winter solstice after passing the trial and remain there until an exit was found, thus becoming fully Awakened.

That time between finishing the First Nightmare and entering the Dream Realm was very important, as it was the last chance to train and prepare yourself a person would receive.

In Sunny's case, that time was only about a month, which was as bad as it gets.

And then there was the final benefit, unique to every Aspirant passing the trial… the first Aspect Ability.

This was the "magic power" that elevated Awakened above mundane humans. Aspect Abilities were diverse, unique, and powerful. Some could be categorized into types — like combat, sorcery and utility — but some were simply beyond imagination. Armed with the power of their Abilities, Awakened had been able to save the world from the flood of Nightmare Creatures.

However, that power came with a catch. With their first Ability, every Awakened also received a Flaw, sometimes called the counter. These Flaws were as diverse as Abilities, ranging from comparatively harmless to crippling, or, in some cases, even fatal.

'I wonder what type of Ability a temple slave would get,' Sunny thought, not too optimistic about his prospects. 'The choice of Flaws, on the other hand, seems to be almost limitless. Let's hope my Aspect will evolve at the end of this fiasco. Or, even better, change completely.'

If the Aspirant performed especially well, there was a chance of his given Aspect going through an early evolution. Aspects, just like Soul Cores, had ranks based on potential power and rarity. The lowest rank was called Dormant, followed by Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and Divine — although no one has ever seen the last one.

'With the amount of crap it had put me through, the Spell — if it has any conscience — has to give me at least an Awakened Aspect. Right? Or maybe even an Ascended one!'

Finally, there was a tiny possibility of receiving a True Name — something like an honorary title bestowed by the Spell to its favorite Awakened. The name itself had no benefit, but every famous Awakened seemed to have one. It was considered to be the highest mark of excellence.

However, the number of people who had managed to get a True Name during their First Nightmare was so small that Sunny didn't even bother thinking about it.

'Who needs excellence? Give me power!'

He cursed, feeling that this attempt at wishful thinking had only made him more depressed and angry.

'Maybe I'm allergic to dreaming.'

An allergy like that would be truly ironic, considering that he was destined to spend half of his remaining life in the Dream Realm — if he even survives long enough to get there, that is.

However, Sunny's mental escapade was not completely useless. Looking up from the slippery rocks under his feet, he noticed that the sun was already considerably lower. Come to think of it, the air also seemed to be much colder.

'At least it helped me pass the time,' Sunny thought.

The night was approaching.

Chapter-10: First Man Down

By the time they decided to stop, Sunny was on the verge of fainting. After hours and hours of traversing the rough mountain slope, his body was almost at its limit. However, to everyone's surprise, Shifty seemed to be doing even worse than him.

The roguish slave's eyes were muddy and unfocused, aimlessly wandering around. His breath was ragged and shallow, as though something was exerting pressure on his lungs. He looked feverish and unwell.

As soon as Hero found a suitable place for a camp, Shifty simply collapsed on the ground. The most unnerving part about all of this was the lack of angry cursing that they had already gotten used to. The slave lay silent and motionless, with only movements of his chest betraying that he was still alive.

Several moments later, he uncorked his flagon with a shaky hand and greedily drank a few large gulps.

"Conserve your water," Hero said, a hint of concern somehow finding its way into his usually stoic voice.

Disregarding these words, Shifty drank more, emptying the flagon completely.

Scholar didn't look much better than him. The arduous climb took a heavy toll on the older slave. Despite the unbearable cold, he was sweaty, with bloodshot eyes and a grim expression on his face.

Being the weakest of the three, Sunny had somehow managed to endure the best.

"Can't we just melt the snow once there's no more water?"

Hero gave Scholar a complicated look.

"There might come a time when we won't be able to make a fire, as to not attract unwanted attention."

No one commented, knowing perfectly well whose attention they had to avoid. The memory of Mountain King's horror was still fresh in their minds.

Luckily, today Hero had managed to find a natural alcove in the mountain wall, perched precariously behind a narrow ledge. The fire was well hidden by the rocks, allowing them to enjoy its warmth without the fear of being noticed. No one was in the mood to talk, so they just roasted slices of oxen meat above the flames and ate in silence.

By the time the skies had turned completely black, Shifty and Scholar were already asleep, lost in the thrall of their own nightmares. Hero took out his sword and moved to the edge of the rock outcropping.

"Try to rest, as well. I'll take the first watch."

Sunny gave him a nod and lay down near the fire, dead tired. Falling asleep inside a dream was a new experience for him, but, unexpectedly, it turned out to be quite mundane. As soon as his head touched the ground, his consciousness slipped into darkness.

After what felt like only a second, someone had gently shaken him awake. Groggy and disoriented, Sunny blinked a few times, finally noticing Hero hovering above him.

"These two didn't look too well, so it's better to give them some time to recover. Don't let the flames go out and wake us up once the sun starts to rise. Or if… if the beast appears."

Sunny silently rose and changed places with Hero, who added a couple of logs into the fire and was soon fast asleep.

For a few hours, he was on his own.

The skies were black, with dim stars and a sharp crescent of the newborn moon. However, its light was not enough to pierce the darkness that enveloped the mountain. Only Sunny's eyes seemed to be able to do so.

He sat quietly, looking down the way they came. Despite the fact that they had managed to climb quite high during the previous day, he could still see the distant ribbon of the road. He could even trace it back to the stone platform where the fight with the tyrant had taken place.

The tiny dots littering the stones were the dead bodies of the slaves.

As he was watching them, a dark figure slowly crawled on the platform from beneath the cliff. It stayed motionless for a while and then moved forward, scraping its claws against the ground. Every time a claw hit one of the bodies, the tyrant would grab and bring it to its maw.

The wind brought the muffled sounds of crunching bones to Sunny's ears. He flinched, accidentally pushing a small rock off the ledge. It fell, hit the slope and then rolled down, causing a few more to follow.

The noise of these falling rocks sounded like thunder in the silent night.

Far below, the tyrant suddenly turned its head, looking directly at Sunny.

Sunny froze, petrified. He was scared to make even the tiniest sound. For a while, he even forgot to breathe. The tyrant was staring directly at him, not doing anything.

A few torturous seconds passed, each feeling like an eternity. Then the tyrant calmly turned away and continued to devour dead slaves, as though he had not seen Sunny at all.

'It's blind,' Sunny suddenly understood.

He inhaled, watching Mountain King with widened eyes. It was true. The creature could not see.

Looking back at everything that had happened earlier, he grew more and more certain of his guess. Those milky, expressionless eyes. Come to think of it, he never saw the tyrant moving them at all. And back when Sunny was pushing the wagon off the cliff, the tyrant only reacted after the wagon's had started to fall, scraping loudly against the rocks.

Of course! It was all making sense now.

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At the break of dawn, Sunny had woken the others up. Hero had hoped that a full night's rest would do Shifty and Scholar some good, but his hopes were crushed. Somehow, the two slaves looked even worse than before. It was as though yesterday's climb had overstrained Scholar too much.

However, Shifty's condition could not be explained by simple overexertion. He was deadly pale and shaky, with half-conscious eyes and a lost look on his face.

"What's wrong with him?"

Scholar, who himself was not doing very well, helplessly shook his head.

"It might be the mountain sickness. It affects different people differently."

His voice sounded raspy and weak.

"I'm fine, assholes. Get out of my face."

Shifty had trouble forming full sentences, but still insisted that he was alright.

Hero frowned and then took most of the supplies the defiant slave was supposed to carry before adding them to his own load. After hesitating a little, he gave some to Sunny, too.

"Did anything happen while we were asleep?"

Sunny stared at him for a few seconds.

"The monster ate the dead."

The young soldier's frown deepened.

"How do you know?"

"I heard it."

Hero moved to the edge and looked down, trying to make out the distant stone platform. After a minute or so, he clenched his jaw, showing signs of uncertainty for the first time.

"Then we'll have to move faster. If the creature is finished with all the bodies, it will come for us next. We need to find that old path before nightfall."

Frightened and dejected, they set out again and continued to climb. Sunny was slowly dying under the weight of the added load. Thankfully, Shifty and Scholar had already drunk most of the water, lightening it a little.

'This is hell,' he thought.

They climbed higher, and higher, and higher. The sun was climbing with them, slowly approaching the zenith. There was no talking, no laughs, only strained breathing. Each of the four survivors was concentrated on his own steps and footing.

However, Shifty was falling farther and farther behind. His strength was abandoning him.

And then, at some point, Sunny heard a desperate scream. Turning around, he only had time to see a panic-stricken face. Then Shifty fell backward, his foot slipping on an ice-covered rock. He hit the ground hard and rolled down, still trying to grab onto something.

But it was too late.

Frozen in place and powerless, they could only watch as his body tumbled down the slope, leaving bloody marks on the rocks. With each second, Shifty looked less like a man and more like a rag doll.

A handful of moments later, he finally came to a halt, hitting the top of a large, protruding stone in a pile of broken flesh.

Shifty was dead.

Chapter-11: Crossroads

The three of them stood motionless, looking down in uneasy silence. What happened to Shifty didn't come as a shock, but it was still a hard thing to digest. An ominous feeling settled in their hearts — seeing the broken body of their companion, it was too easy to imagine one of them sharing the same fate.

No one knew what to say.

After a minute or so, Scholar finally sighed.

"It's a good thing that you took most of the supplies he had been carrying."

'A bit heartless, but not wrong,' Sunny thought, giving the older slave a careful look.

Scholar frowned, realizing that his mask of a kind-hearted gentleman had slipped for a second, and hurriedly added in a somber tone:

"May you rest in peace, my friend."

'Wow. What a performance.'

Actually, Sunny had not believed in his benevolent act for a second. Every kid from the outskirts knew that people who acted kind for no reason were the ones to be most wary of. They were either fools or monsters. Scholar didn't seem like a fool, so Sunny became cautious of him from the moment they met.

He got this far by being a mistrustful cynic, and there was no reason to change now.

"We have to go." Hero said, casting one last look down.

His voice was even, but Sunny could feel a well of emotion behind it. He just couldn't tell what that emotion was.

Scholar sighed and turned away, too. Sunny stared at the bloodied rocks for a few more seconds.

'Why do I feel so guilty?' he thought, bewildered by this unexpected reaction. 'He got what he deserved.'

A little unsettled, Sunny turned around and followed his two remaining companions.

Just like that, they left Shifty behind and continued to climb.

At this altitude, traversing the mountain was getting harder and harder. The wind was slamming into them with enough force to throw a person off-balance if they were not careful, making every step seem like a gamble. The air was becoming too thin to breathe. Due to the lack of oxygen, Sunny was starting to feel dizzy and nauseated.

It was as though they were all slowly suffocating.

Altitude sickness was not something one could overcome with effort. It was subtle and overbearing at the same time, affecting the strong and the weak with no regard to their fitness and endurance. If his luck was bad, an elite athlete could succumb to it faster than a random passerby.

It was just a question of your body's innate aptitude and adaptability. Lucky ones were able to get over it after experiencing mild symptoms. The others were sometimes crippled for days or weeks, suffering from all kinds of torturous side effects. Some even died.

As though all that wasn't bad enough, it was getting colder, too. The warm clothes and fur weren't enough to keep the chill at bay anymore. Sunny felt simultaneously feverish and freezing, cursing every decision he had made in his life to end up here, on the endless icy slope.

This mountain was not a place for humans.

And yet they had to go on.

A few hours passed. Despite everything, the three survivors continued to struggle forward, slowly moving higher and higher. Wherever that old path Scholar had talked about was, by now, it couldn't have been far. At least that's what Sunny was hoping for.

But at some point, he started to doubt if the path even existed. Maybe the older slave lied. Maybe the path was long ago destroyed by ravages of time. Maybe they had already missed it without even noticing.

Just as he was about to fall into despair, they finally found it.

It was weathered and narrow, barely enough for two people to walk side by side. The path wasn't paved, but rather cut from the black rock by some unknown tool or magic, winding its way up the mountain like a tail of a sleeping dragon. Here and there, it was hidden beneath the snow. But most importantly, it was flat. Sunny had never been that happy to see something flat in his life.

Without saying a word, Scholar dropped his rucksack and sat down. He was deathly pale, gasping for air like a fish out of water. Despite that, there was a slight grin on his face.

"Told you."

Hero gave him a nod and looked around. A few seconds later, he turned back to the triumphant slave:

"Stand up. It's not time to rest yet."

Scholar blinked a few times, then glanced at him with pleading eyes.

"Just… just give me a few minutes."

The young soldier was going to retort, but Sunny suddenly put a hand on his shoulder. Hero turned to face him.

"What is it?"

"It's gone."

"What is gone?"

Sunny gestured down, back the way they came.

"Shifty's body. It's gone."

Hero stared at him for a few moments, clearly failing to understand what Sunny was trying to say.

'Oh, right. They don't know that Shifty's name is Shifty. Ahem. Awkward.'

He wanted to explain, but both Scholar and Hero seemed to have grasped his meaning. Simultaneously, they moved to the edge of the stone path and looked down, trying to spot the place where Shifty had met his end.

Indeed, the splattering of blood could still be seen on the jagged rocks, but the corpse itself was nowhere to be found.

Scholar flinched back and crawled as far away from the edge as he could. The young soldier also backed away, instinctively grabbing the handle of his sword. The three of them exchanged tense looks, clearly understanding the implication of Shifty's disappearance.

"It's the monster," Scholar said, even paler than before. "It's following us."

Hero gritted his teeth.

"You are right. And if it is that close, we will inevitably be forced to fight it soon."

The idea of fighting the tyrant was as frightening as it was preposterous. He might as well have said that they will all be dead soon. The truth of it was painfully clear to both Sunny and Scholar.

But the older slave, surprisingly, did not look panicked. Instead, he lowered his gaze and quietly said:

"Not necessarily."

Hero and Sunny turned to him, all ears. The young soldier raised an eyebrow.

"Explain?"

'Here it comes.'

Scholar sighed.

"The beast had traced us this far in just a day. That means that there are two most probable possibilities. Either it is smart enough to realize where we are going, or it is following the scent of blood."

After a bit of thinking, Hero nodded, agreeing with this logic. The older slave smiled slightly and continued.

"Whether it is one or another, we can throw him off our trail and buy some time."

"How do we do that?"

Despite the urgency in Hero's voice, Scholar hesitated and remained silent.

"Why are you not answering? Speak!"

The older slave sighed again and slowly, as though against his will, answered. Sunny was waiting for this moment for a while now.

"We'll just have to… make the boy bleed. Drag him down the path, then leave him there as bait and go up instead. His sacrifice will save our lives."

'Right on time.'

If Sunny wasn't mad — and scared witless, of course — he would have smiled. His judgment, it seems, was eerily on point. Affirmation was always nice… but not in the situation where being right also meant potentially being used as monster bait.

He remembered the words Scholar had spoken back when Shifty was campaigning to have Sunny killed — "Don't be too hasty, my friend. The boy might prove useful later on." These words, which had sounded benevolent then, now turned out to hide a much more sinister meaning.

'What a bastard!'

Now it all depended on whether or not Hero would decide to follow through with Scholar's plan.

The young soldier blinked, astonished.

"What do you mean, make him bleed?"

Scholar shook his head.

"It's simple, really. If the monster knows where we are going, we have no choice but to abandon our plans to reach the mountain pass and go over the peak of the mountain instead. If the monster is following the scent of blood, we have to use one of us as bait to mislead it."

He paused.

"Only by leaving a bleeding man further down the path can we reliably avoid the pursuit no matter how it is tracking us."

Hero stood motionless, his eyes jumping between Scholar and Sunny. After a few seconds, he asked:

"How can you bring yourself to propose something so vile?"

The older slave masterfully pretended to look aggrieved and somber.

"Of course, it pains me! But if we do nothing, all three of us will die. This way, at least, the boy's death will save two lives. The gods will reward him for his sacrifice!"

'Gee, what a silver tongue. I'm almost convinced myself.'

The young soldier opened his mouth, then closed it again, hesitating.

Sunny was silently watching the other two survivors, measuring his chances of coming on top in a fight. Scholar was already halfway to being a corpse, so overpowering him would not be a problem. Hero, however… Hero presented an obstacle.

Chapter-12: The Smell of Blood

Right now, that obstacle was looking down, avoiding Sunny's gaze. His hand was resting on the sword handle. As always, the young slave had no idea about what was going on inside Hero's perfectly shaped head.

The uncertainty was making him nervous.

Finally, after some time had passed, the soldier spoke:

"I have only one question."

Both Sunny and Scholar stared at him while holding their breaths.

"Yes?"

"You said that one of us must be sacrificed to save the other two. Why him? From what I see, you are far closer to the grave."

'A great question! I was just about to ask it myself.'

Sunny turned to the older slave, trying very hard to suppress a mocking grin. But to his dismay, Scholar had an answer ready.

"Before the first attack, he was already bleeding because of your senior's whip. During the attack, he was drenched in the blood of a fellow slave. His cloak, too, was soaked in it when the previous owner died. The boy already reeks of blood. Keeping him alive will put us in danger. That's why he is the best choice."

The grin died before reaching Sunny's face.

'Curse you and your big brain!'

Scholar's reasoning was appallingly solid. Hero listened, his expression growing darker with each word. Finally, he looked at Sunny, a dangerous light shining in his eyes.

"That is true."

Sunny felt his mouth getting dry. Cold sweat was running down his spine. He tensed, ready to act…

But at that moment, Hero smiled.

"Your logic is almost unassailable," he said, unsheathing the sword. "However, you failed to account for one thing."

Scholar raised an eyebrow, trying to hide his own nervousness.

"What might that be?"

The young soldier turned to face him, the smile disappearing from his face. Now, he was radiating thick, practically palpable killing intent.

"It's that I know who you are, Your Grace. I also know what you've done, and how you ended up a slave. Just one of the revolting crimes you have committed would be enough to make me want to kill you. So if there is someone among us who deserves to be sacrificed… it's you."

Scholar's eyes widened.

"But… but the smell of blood!"

"Don't worry about it. I'll make you bleed enough to overpower whatever residual scent the boy carries."

It all happened so fast that Sunny barely had time to react. Hero lunged forward with a speed that seemed almost inhuman. A moment later, Scholar was shrieking on the ground, his leg broken with one strike from the flat side of the young soldier's sword. Not giving him an opportunity to recover, Hero stomped on his other leg, and a sickening sound of shattering bones could be clearly heard.

The shriek turned into a sobbing howl.

Just like that, Scholar was done for.

The brutality of Hero's actions was in such stark contrast with his usually graceful demeanor that Sunny felt blood turning to ice in his veins. This was… scary.

The soldier gave him a calm look and said in a placid tone:

"Wait for me here."

Then he grabbed the older slave and dragged him down the path, soon disappearing behind a rock outcropping. After a few minutes, terrible screams could be heard echoing through the wind.

Sunny was left alone, trembling.

'Crap! This is… this is too much!'

He still couldn't believe how sudden Scholar's demise came to be. And how ruthless it was.

Some time later, Hero was back, acting as though nothing had happened. But it was exactly that normalcy that unnerved Sunny the most.

After sorting through the contents of Scholar's rucksack and throwing most of the firewood out, the young soldier put it over his shoulder and nonchalantly turned to the young slave:

"Let's go. We need to hurry."

Not knowing what to say, Sunny gave him a nod and headed forward.

Now there were only two of them left.

It was sort of stupid, but Sunny suddenly felt lonesome.

Walking on the stone path was much easier than scaling the mountain wall. He even had time for unnecessary thoughts. A strange feeling of melancholy descended on Sunny… somehow, he began to feel that the end of this nightmare, whatever it might be, was not far off now.

They walked in silence for some time before Hero spoke.

"Don't feel guilty about what happened. It's not your fault. The decision was mine, and mine alone."

The young soldier was a few steps ahead, so Sunny couldn't see his face.

"Besides, if you knew this man's sins… actually, it's better that you don't. Just trust me when I say that killing him was an act of justice."

'I wonder which one of us feels guilty.'

These people… always trying to rationalize their actions, always desperate to maintain an illusion of righteousness even while doing most foul things. Sunny hated the hypocrisy.

Not getting an answer, Hero chuckled.

"You don't like to talk, do you? Well, fair enough. Silence is gold."

They didn't speak again after that, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

The sun was setting, painting the world into a million shades of crimson. This high up, the air was clean and crisp, pierced by streams of scarlet light. Below them, a sea of maroon clouds was slowly rolling past the mountain. The stars and the moon had begun to reveal themselves in the vermillion sky.

It was quite beautiful.

However, Sunny could only think about how cold it was going to be once the sun fully disappears.

Before that happened, Hero had found them a shelter. Not far from the path, hidden behind some tall rocks, was a narrow crevice that extended into the slope of the mountain. Happy to be safe from the piercing wind, they explored the crevice and ended up in a small, well-concealed cave.

Sunny made a move to unbundle some firewood, but Hero stopped him with a shake of his head.

"Today we will camp without making a fire. The beast is too close."

Camping without the warm flames to keep them company was not going to be pleasant, but at least they weren't going to freeze to death inside the cave. In any case, the alternative was too frightening.

Sunny sat down, putting his back against the cave's wall. Hero settled opposite of him, looking downcast and thoughtful.

He was obviously in a strange mood. If nothing else, it was apparent from the fact that today, for the first time, the young soldier had failed to care for his sword after making camp.

Soon, the sun was gone, and their small cave became completely dark. Sunny, of course, could still see perfectly well; Hero, on the other hand, was now completely blind.

In the darkness, his handsome face looked noble and, for some reason, sorrowful. Sunny studied it, not willing to fall asleep.

After a while, Hero suddenly spoke in a quiet voice:

"You know, it's strange. Usually, I can feel someone's presence even in absolute darkness. But with you, there's nothing. It's like you are just one of the shadows."

With only silence to answer him, he smiled.

"Are you asleep?"

The question echoed in the darkness. Sunny, who had never spoken with Hero unless there was an urgent need to, and even then only using a few words at best, felt like there was a strange intimacy between them now. That's why he decided to talk. Maybe the darkness gave him courage.

Besides, there was an occasion.

"Why? Are you waiting for me to fall asleep before you kill me? Or will you do it in the morning?"

Chapter-13: Moment of Truth

The smile froze on Hero's face. He lowered his head, as though in shame. After a minute or so passed, shrouded in heavy silence, he finally answered.

"Yes. I thought that if I do it when you sleep, you won't have to suffer."

Unseen to him, a bitter grin appeared on Sunny's face.

A long sigh escaped from the young soldier's lips. He rested his back against the cave's wall, still not looking up.

"I don't expect you to forgive me. This sin, too, will be mine to bear. But, please, if you can… find it in your heart to understand. If things were different, I would have gladly faced that monster to let you escape. But my life… does not belong to me alone. There is an unencompassable duty I am sworn to fulfill.

Until it's done, I cannot allow myself to die."

Sunny laughed.

"You people… Look at you! Planning to kill me and still insisting on having a good excuse. How very convenient! I really hate hypocrites like you the most. Why don't you be honest for once? Don't give me that crap...

just say it! I'm going to kill you because it's easy. I'm going to kill you because I want to survive."

Hero closed his eyes, his face full of sadness.

"I'm sorry. I knew you wouldn't be able to understand."

"What's there to understand?"

Sunny leaned forward, anger coursing through his veins.

"Tell me. Why do I have to die?"

The young soldier finally looked up. Even though he couldn't see in the dark, he turned his face in the direction of Sunny's voice.

"That man was a villain… but he was also right. The scent of blood is too heavy on you. It will attract the beast."

"You can just let me go, you know. We'll part ways. After that whether or not the monster finds me won't be your problem."

Hero shook his head.

"Dying in that creature's maw… is too cruel a fate. It's better if I do it myself. You are my responsibility, after all."

"How noble of you."

Sunny leaned back, dejected. After a short while, he quietly said:

"You know… when I just came here, I was ready to die. After all, in this whole world — two worlds, actually — there's not a single soul who cares whether I live or die. When I'm gone, no one will be sad. No one will even remember that I existed."

There was a forlorn look on his face. A moment later, however, it was gone, replaced by mirth.

"But then I changed my mind. Somewhere along the way, I decided to survive. I must survive, no matter what."

Hero gave him a thoughtful look.

"To live a life worth remembering?"

Sunny grinned. A dark gleam appeared in his eyes.

"No. To spite you all."

The young soldier was silent for a few moments, then nodded, accepting this answer. He rose to his feet.

"Don't worry. I'll make it quick."

"Aren't you overly confident? What makes you think you'll be able to kill me? Maybe I'll kill you instead."

Hero shook his head.

"I doubt that."

… But in the next second, he staggered and fell on one knee. The young man's face turned deathly pale, and with a pained groan, he suddenly vomited blood.

A satisfied smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Finally."

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"Finally."

Hero was standing on his knees, the lower part of his face covered in blood. Astonished, he was staring at his hands, trying to understand what had happened to him.

"What… what magic is this?"

With wide eyes and a pale face, he turned to Sunny.

"Was… was that thief right? Did you put the curse of the Shadow God on us?"

Sunny sighed.

"I wish that I had the ability to throw divine curses around, but no. To tell you the truth, I don't have any abilities at all."

"Then.. how?"

The young slave shrugged.

"That's why I poisoned you all."

Hero flinched, trying to comprehend his words.

"What?"

"After the tyrant first attacked, you send me to search for water. While gathering flagons from the dead soldiers, I squeezed Bloodbane juice into each one — except my own, of course. Not enough to taste it, but enough to slowly kill anyone who would drink from them."

The soldier gritted his teeth, struggling through pain. A sudden realization appeared on his face.

"So that's why… the other two were in such bad shape."

Sunny nodded.

"Shifty drank the most, so his condition worsened the fastest. Scholar was also not long for this world, but you finished him off before the poison could. Yourself, however… it was as though Bloodbane had no effect on you at all. I was really starting to get worried."

Hero's face darkened.

"I see… I understand."

He thought about something, then looked at Sunny with surprise.

"But… but back then you didn't know… that we will turn on you."

Sunny just laughed.

"Oh, please. It was obvious. Shifty was the kind of man who would kill for a pair of boots. Scholar was like a wolf in sheep's clothing. People are selfish and cruel in the best of situations — was I supposed to believe that those two weren't going to do something terrible to me when faced with certain death?"

Hero spat more blood.

"Then… what about me?"

"You?" A disdainful expression appeared on Sunny's face. "You are the worst of them."

"Why?"

Sunny looked at him and leaned forward.

"I might have not learned much in my short life, but I do know one thing," he said, all traces of humor gone from his voice.

Now there was only cold, callous contempt. Sunny's face hardened as he spat:

"There is nothing more pathetic than a slave who begins to trust his slaver."

Hearing these words, Hero lowered his head.

"I see."

Then, suddenly, he laughed.

"You… you are a wicked little shit, aren't you?"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"There's no need to be rude."

But Hero wasn't listening to him.

"Good. This is good. My conscience will be clearer."

The young slave sighed in irritation.

"What are you mumbling about? Just die already."

Hero chuckled and suddenly pierced him with a stare. Somehow, he didn't look so sick anymore.

"You see, that plan would have worked if I was a normal human. But, alas, my Soul Core has Awakened long ago. I've slain countless enemies and absorbed their power. Bloodbane poison, unpleasant as it might be, can never kill me."

'Crap!'

Sunny turned around and tried to run away, but it was already too late. Something hit him in the back, sending his body crashing into the rock wall. With a scream, he felt a sharp pain piercing his left side. Rolling out of the cave, Sunny clutched his chest, scrambled back onto his feet and ran, trying to escape the narrow crevice.

He managed to reach the old path, finally being able to see the stars and the pale moon shining brightly in the night sky. But it was as far as he was able to get.

"Stop."

As the cold voice sounded behind him, Sunny froze. If Hero really had an Awakened Soul Core, he had no chances of getting away from him. In a fight, he had no chances at all.

"Turn around."

The young slave obediently turned, holding his hands up. He looked at Hero, who was wiping the blood off his face with a displeased look in his eyes. The two of them stared at each other, shivering in the murderous cold.

"Was it worth it? No matter. Despite it all, I will be true to my promise. I'll make it quick."

The soldier unsheathed his sword.

"Do you have any last words?"

Sunny did not answer.

However, a small silver bell suddenly appeared in his hand.

Hero frowned.

"Where were you hiding that thing?"

Sunny shook the bell. A beautiful, clear ringing sound flowed over the mountain, filling the night with an enchanting melody.

"What are you doing?! Stop!"

The young slave dutifully stopped.

"What was…"

Right under Hero's bewildered eyes, the silver bell disappeared into thin air. He looked at Sunny, stumped and suspicious.

"Tell me! What did you just do?"

But Sunny didn't answer. In fact, he hadn't said a single word ever since escaping the cave. Right now, he wasn't even breathing.

Hero, on the other hand, continued to speak.

"Tell me right now or you will regret it."

He scowled.

"Why are you not saying anything?"

The shivering boy just stared at him, completely silent.

No… he was staring into the darkness behind him.

Hero's eyes widened.

"What…"

Chapter-14: Child of Shadows

Sunny had no choice but to resort to one last, desperate gamble.

He had no chance against the enemy in a direct confrontation, at least not without an advantage. Bloodbane poison was supposed to be his hidden card, but turned out to be nearly useless. Being able to see in the dark did not help that much, too: somehow, Hero was able to perceive their surroundings even without any light.

Whether he was using his sense of hearing or some magical ability, Sunny did not know — not that it mattered now that they had left the cave and were standing under the moonlit sky.

Now he had only one advantage left. The fact that he knew that the tyrant was blind, and Hero did not. Acting on that knowledge, however, was easier said than done.

But what else could he do?

That's why he tried to stay as quiet as possible and rang the silver bell. If the description did not lie, its ringing could be heard from miles away. Surely, the tyrant was going to hear it, too.

Now Sunny only had to stay silent, stall for time and hope that the monster would come. As he did so, Hero's bewilderment slowly turned into anger.

"Tell me right now or you will regret it."

His voice was quite threatening, but still, the young slave did not answer. He just shivered in the cold and tried not to groan despite the pulsing pain in his chest.

"Why are you not answering?"

But Sunny did not dare to answer. He held his breath and watched, horrified, as the familiar colossal figure appeared behind Hero. His lungs were on fire, and his heart was beating like crazy. It was beating so loud that he was even afraid that the blind tyrant would hear it.

But, of course, it couldn't be louder than Hero's voice, who was still talking, turning himself into the only source of noise on this mountain.

At the last second, a hint of understanding appeared in the young soldier's eyes. He began to turn around, his sword rising with lightning speed.

But it was too late.

A massive hand appeared from the darkness and caught him into an iron grip. The bone claws scraped against the armor, pulling it apart. Mountain King dragged Hero back, paying little attention to the sword biting into its wrist. Viscous saliva was streaming from its opened maw.

Petrified by fear, Sunny slowly turned his back to them and took a couple of steps up the old, winding path. Then he darted away, running as fast as he could.

Behind him, a desperate scream tore apart the silent night. Then a hungry roar followed. It seemed that Hero wasn't going down without a fight, even though his fate was already sealed.

But Sunny didn't care. He was running away, climbing higher and higher.

"I'm sorry, Hero," he thought. "I did say that I will watch you die… but, as you know, I am a liar. So go and die on your own…"

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A lonesome dark mountain stood tall against the raging winds.

Jagged and proud, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly light.

Under that light, a young man with pale skin and black hair reached the peak of the mountain. However, his looks didn't match the magnificence of the scene: wounded and staggering, he looked pathetic and weak.

The young man looked like a walking corpse.

His coarse tunic and cloak were torn and smeared with blood. His sunken eyes were cloudy and lifeless. His body was bruised, beaten and cut. There were specks of bloody foam on his lips.

He was hunched over, cradling the left side of his chest. Each step caused him to moan, ragged breath barely escaping through gritted teeth.

Sunny was hurting all over. But most of all, he was cold.

So, so cold.

He just wanted to lie down in the snow and fall asleep.

But instead, he continued walking. Because he believed that the Nightmare will be over once he reaches the peak.

Step. Step. Another step.

Finally, he had made it.

At the highest point of the mountain, a vast expanse of flat rock was covered with snow. In the center of it, illuminated by moonlight, stood a magnificent temple. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like a palace of a dark god.

At least it did once. Now, the temple was in ruins: fractures and cracks marred the black stones, parts of the roof had collapsed, letting in ice and snow. Its tall gates were broken, as if smashed into pieces by a hand of a giant.

Still, Sunny was satisfied.

"Found you," he said in a hoarse voice.

Gathering the last of his strength, the young slave slowly limped in the direction of the ruined temple. His thoughts were muddled and confused.

'See this, Hero?' he thought, forgetting for a second that Hero was already dead. 'I've made it. You were strong and ruthless, and I was weak and timid. Yet now you are a corpse, and I am still alive. Isn't it funny?'

He stumbled and groaned, feeling the edges of his broken ribs cutting deeper into his lungs. Blood was dripping from his mouth. Dead or not, Hero had gotten him good with that single strike.

'Actually, it's not. What do any of you even know about being ruthless? Poor fools. In the world where I come from, people had thousands of years to turn cruelty into an art.

And as someone on the receiving end of all that cruelty… don't you think I would know more about being vicious than you ever could?'

He was getting closer to the temple.

'Truth be told, you never stood a chance… wait. What was I thinking about?'

A moment later, he had already forgotten. There was only pain, the dark temple, and the overpowering desire to sleep.

'Don't fall for it. It's just hypothermia. If you fall asleep, you'll die.'

Finally, Sunny reached the steps of the black temple. He started to climb them, not noticing thousands of bones that were scattered around. These bones once belonged to humans and monsters both. All of them were killed by the invisible guardians still lingering around the temple.

As Sunny was climbing the steps, one of the shapeless guardians approached him. It was ready to snuff out the spark of life that was burning weakly in the defiler's chest, but then stopped, sensing a faint, strangely familiar scent coming from his soul. The scent of divinity. Sorrowful and lonesome, the guardian moved aside, letting Sunny pass.

Oblivious, he entered the temple.

Sunny found himself in a grandiose hall. Cascades of moonlight were falling through the holes in the partially collapsed roof. Deep shadows were surrounding these circles of silver light, not daring to touch them. The floor was covered in snow and ice.

At the far end of the hall, a large altar was cut from a single piece of black marble. It was the only thing inside the temple untouched by snow. Forgetting why he came here, Sunny headed for the altar.

He just wanted to sleep.

The altar was dry, clean, and as wide as a bed. Sunny climbed on it and lay down.

It seemed like he was going to die.

He was okay with it.

Sunny tried to close his eyes, but was stopped by a sudden noise coming from the direction of the temple's entrance. He turned his head to look, not even a little bit

curious. What he saw would have sent chills running down his spine if he wasn't so cold, tired and indifferent.

Mountain King was standing there, looking at him with its five blind eyes. He was still massive, terrifying and revolting. Worm-like shapes were still moving frantically under its skin. It was sniffing the air, salivating.

Then it opened its maw and moved forward, slowly approaching the altar.

'What an ugly bastard,' Sunny thought and suddenly clutched his chest, convulsing in a fit of torturous coughing.

Bloody foam flew from his mouth and fell on the altar. However, the black marble soon absorbed it.

A second later, it was as pristine as it was before.

The tyrant was just about to reach Sunny. It was already stretching its hands to grab him.

'I guess this is the end,' he thought, resigned to his fate.

But at the last second, suddenly, the voice of the Spell resounded in the dark temple.

[You have offered yourself as a sacrifice to the gods.]

[The gods are dead, and can not hear you.]

[Your soul bears the mark of divinity.]

[You are a temple slave.]

[Shadow God stirs in his eternal slumber.]

[He sends a blessing from beyond the grave.]

[Child of Shadows, receive your blessing!]

Under Sunny's astonished eyes, the shadows crowding the great hall suddenly moved, as though coming alive. Tentacles of darkness surged forward, entangling Mountain King's arms and legs. The mighty tyrant struggled, trying to get free.

But how could it resist the power of a god?

The shadows dragged Mountain King back, pulling in different directions. The tyrant opened its maw, and a furious howl escaped it.

The next second, its body ruptured, torn apart into pieces.

Blood, viscera and severed limbs fell on the floor in a crimson torrent. Just like that, the horrible creature was dead.

Sunny blinked.

Once again, he was alone in the ruined temple. The great hall was dark and silent.

And then the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened tyrant, Mountain King.]

[Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is over.]

[Prepare for appraisal…]

Chapter-15: Shadow Slave

[Prepare for appraisal…]

Sunny found himself in a space between dream and reality. It was an endless black void illuminated by a myriad of stars. Between those stars, countless strings of silver light were woven into a beautiful and inconceivably complex net, forming various nexuses and constellations. It was truly breathtaking.

Somehow, Sunny understood that he was seeing the inner workings of the Nightmare Spell. He also couldn't help but think that it looked a lot like the celestial equivalent of a neural network. If so… was the Spell alive?

This was a question that countless people had been asking themselves for the past few decades. The best answer they had come up with was that there was no way to know. The Spell was neither alive nor dead; neither sentient nor mindless.

It was more of a function than a creature.

But Sunny was in no mood to ponder philosophical questions. He was eagerly awaiting his boon.

The Spell was still appraising his performance. However, the first reward had nothing to do with it.

[You have received a Memory: Puppeteer's Shroud]

'Yes!'

Sunny felt incredibly elated. He was almost ready to do a happy dance. That Memory belonged to Mountain King, who was an awakened tyrant — which meant that the Memory itself was of the Awakened rank. Getting it was a stroke of incredible luck!

There were seven ranks to everything in the Spell. These ranks were, in order of growing power: Dormant, Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and

Divine (with the exclusion of Nightmare Creatures, who were ranked as Dormant, Awakened, Fallen, Corrupted, Great, Cursed and Unholy).

From the Spell's point of view, Sunny was a dormant human. Having a Memory of a higher rank than his own soul core would be of great help once he enters the Dream Realm. The power gap between different ranks simply could not be overestimated.

He wanted to take a look at the Puppeteer's Shroud, but there was no more time. The Spell was done with its appraisal.

Here in the void, its voice didn't sound subtle and familiar anymore. Rather, it seemed like the universe itself was speaking. Sunny held his breath, listening.

[Aspirant! Your trial is over.]

[A nameless slave ascended the Black Mountain. Both heroes and monsters fell by his hand. Unbroken, he entered the ruined temple of a long-forgotten god and spilled his blood on the sacred altar. The gods were dead, and yet they listened.]

[You have defeated a dormant beast: Mountain King's Larva.]

[You have defeated three dormant humans, names unknown.]

[You have defeated an awakened human: Auro of the Nine.]

[You have defeated an awakened tyrant: Mountain King.]

[You have received the Shadow God's blessing.]

[You have achieved the impossible!]

[Final appraisal: glorious. Your treachery truly knows no bounds.]

That final part was not really necessary, as far as Sunny was concerned, but he was still pretty satisfied with the praise from the Spell. He felt like his chances of evolving his Aspect to an Awakened, or even Ascended one were pretty high.

His overall power was still dependent on the rank of his soul core, which would remain dormant until much later, but the rank of the Aspect itself would do wonders for his overall potential.

[Dreamer Sunless, receive your boon!]

He was an Aspirant no more. Sunny grinned.

[You have been bestowed a True Name: Lost from Light.]

His jaw dropped. A true name! He had received a true name! Never in his wildest dreams did Sunny dream of becoming one of the chosen few to accomplish such feat — and in his very first Nightmare to boot! Not even all of the Saints could boast of having one. He was an elite now, a bonafide cream of the crop!

He was going to be rich!

But the rewards kept coming.

[Your Aspect is ready to evolve. Evolve Aspect?]

'What kind of a question is that?!'

Sunny crossed his fingers and said "yes".

[Dormant Aspect Temple Slave is evolving…]

[New Aspect acquired.]

[Aspect Rank: Divine.]

Sunny fell over.

[Aspect Name: Shadow Slave.]

***

'Divine… it's Divine.'

Sunny was standing on his knees, stupefied. The shock was so great that for a second there he lost all control over his limbs and fell.

'It said "divine"... right?'

He raised a trembling hand and rubbed his eyes, making sure that he was awake. Or rather conscious, since, technically, he was still sleeping in the underground vault of the police station.

Confused by all this terminology, Sunny silently summoned the runes and found the lines describing his aspect.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a miraculous shadow left behind by a dead god. As a divine shadow, you possess plenty of strange and wondrous powers. However, your existence is empty and lonesome; you mourn the passing of your former master and long to find a new one.]

Innate Ability: [Shadow Bond].

Ability Description: [Find a worthy master and let them know your True Name. Once they recite it out loud, you will be bound to their will, unable to disobey any command. It is improper for a shadow, let alone a divine one, to walk around without a master.]

That was… a lot to digest.

First of all, Sunny felt his heart beating faster. He heard it right! All the suffering and horror he had experienced in the First Nightmare paid off in the end. A divine Aspect, he had received a divine Aspect! Anything above Awakened was rare and immensely valuable!

People with Ascended Aspects were rare enough to be fought over by various factions. The factions themselves were built around singular powerhouses with Transcendent or Supreme Aspects. And he had never, ever heard of anyone acquiring a Divine one. Never!

Anything with the "divine" prefix was so hard to find that it mostly lived in the realm of myths and legends. After all, the human race had not reached that high yet; it was only slightly more than a decade since humans managed to finally conquer the Third Nightmare and receive the ability to evolve their cores to Transcendent rank.

As Transcendents — or Saints, as they were called in the real world — powerful Awakened ruled over the Dream Realm, but even they did not dare to face Nightmare Creatures of higher ranks. Subsequently, there were not a lot of Memories and Echoes of Supreme rank around, let alone Sacred… or Divine. The same went for Aspects.

And yet Sunny just got one!

He grinned, driven half-mad by joy and arrogance. However, his jubilation was a little muddied. After all, there was that weird innate ability. Of course, he had no intention of becoming someone's magical slave, with no free will of his own. To hell with that!

But it wasn't that bad. All he had to do to avoid that fate was to conceal his True Name. No one except for him could see his status. That meant that Sunny just had to keep his mouth shut, and no one will know that he even had one.

It meant giving up on all the benefits that someone who was bestowed a True Name after the First Nightmare was entitled to, but it all paled in comparison with a Divine Aspect.

'Not a problem,' Sunny thought with a smirk.

If the Spell had the ability to laugh, it would surely do so after hearing his thoughts. However, it didn't. Instead, it began to speak again:

[The First Seal is broken.]

[Awakening dormant powers…]

Chapter-16: Rebirth

Sunny felt something waking up inside of him. With a startled cry, he clutched his chest and stared into the darkness, trying to understand what was happening. The feeling was not painful or unpleasant, yet it was like nothing he had ever experienced. It was as though his soul was being shaken awake, infused with strange new energy.

However, that energy did not come from some outside source. Rather, it was coming from within, as though it had always been there, sleeping.

The energy filled every fiber of his being. Sunny felt his emotions becoming clearer and sharper. Then, his body began to change, too. He felt as though a miniature star was burning in the center of his chest: waves of heat were radiating from it, slowly reaching his stomach and shoulders, then his arms and legs, then his hands and feet.

Under that heat, his bones, muscles, organs and blood vessels were being rebuilt and revitalized. Sunny felt like he was being reborn. He was becoming stronger, faster, healthier.

It was euphoric.

With each second, his transformation was becoming more profound. New confidence settled in Sunny's heart. He was not a weak, frail street kid anymore. He was not as vulnerable against anyone who would wish to bully him as he was in the past.

With his powers awakened and his will tempered by the horrors of the First Nightmare, he was now someone you would not want to cross.

After some time had passed, the star burning in his chest finally cooled down. The heat was replaced with a soothing coldness. That coldness washed over Sunny's body, taking away all the aches and discomforts that had been accumulated there over the years. Then it moved up, reaching his brain and, finally, his eyes.

His vision strangely doubled.

He could still see the void populated by an endless pattern of stars. But he could also see something different.

A silent, calm dark sea illuminated by a lonely black sun.

From his previous knowledge, Sunny knew that this was his so-called Sea of Soul. But he also knew that it was supposed to look quite different.

For starters, it was supposed to be much more lively. The star hanging above — the visual representation of his soul core — was supposed to be burning with bright light, filling the Soul Sea with a warm, blinding shining.

However, Sunny's soul was dark and lightless.

'That's strange.'

He took a look at the black sun. At a closer examination, it actually turned out to be transparent. It's just that with no other major source of light around, the star appeared to be as dark as its surroundings.

Also, no one was supposed to be here except for him. It was his soul, after all! But Sunny had a nagging feeling that somewhere just beyond the periphery of his vision, hidden in the darkness, shapeless forms were constantly moving. No matter how he turned his head, he couldn't catch a clear glimpse of them. And yet the feeling would not go away.

Not wishing to waste any more time on this right now, Sunny turned back to the black sun and finally spotted two spheres of light orbiting around it, as though caught in the soul core's gravity well. A subtle smile appeared on his face.

These were his Memories: Silver Bell and Pupetter's Shroud. Later, there would be dozens of such spheres here. If he was lucky, he would even acquire an Echo or two!

The Spell's voice suddenly pulled him out of the Sea of Soul.

[Awakening Aspect Ability…]

'This is it. The moment of truth,' Sunny thought.

Divine Aspect or not, his immediate future still depended on the first Aspect Ability he would receive. His role in the Dream Realm would be based on its characteristics. If it was a combat ability, he would be most useful on the frontlines of the bloody battles

against the Nightmare Creatures. If it was tied to sorcery, he would likely become a powerful, but fragile ranged fighter.

If it was something having to do with utility, he would be a vitally important part of the behind-the-scenes workings of the Dream Realm. Utility Abilities were also extremely valued in the real world, where Awakened performed many tasks that kept it going.

If he was lucky, he could even become a healer. Healers were very rare, and as such, sought-after specialists.

[Aspect Ability acquired.]

[Aspect Ability Name: Shadow Control.]

Sunny hurriedly summoned the runes. He wanted to go to the description of his new ability right away, but then decided to give his overall information a look first.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [12/1000].

'What? What is that?'

Where the rank of his soul core was supposed to be written, a mysterious "Shadow Core" appeared instead. Sunny looked at it, blinking. He had never heard of anyone having a different kind of core before. Was he that unique?

This enigmatic shadow core would certainly explain why his Sea of Soul looked so strange. And also… He moved his eyes down, noticing the "Shadow Fragments" counter. Usually, there was supposed to be an indicator of the number of soul shards consumed. However, it was nowhere to be seen.

'Do I… do I actually have a completely different progression path than all Awakened?'

The idea was as exciting as it was frightening. Not having to fight for resources with anybody else was an incredible advantage. Most of the human society in the Dream Realm was built around the acquisition of soul shards. If he had no need to gather them

to evolve… not only would he be able to become more powerful with incredible speed, he would also be completely self-sufficient.

On the other hand, he had no idea how to acquire these shadow fragments. However, he had gotten twelve of them somehow already: so whatever it was that he had to do, he had already done it in the First Nightmare.

'I'll have to explore this carefully.'

Satisfied with this decision, Sunny continued to study the runes.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows].

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Ability Description: [Your shadow is more independent than most. It is an invaluable helper.]

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Sunny held his breath and began to read the description again, but at that moment, a new set of runes appeared just below it. Simultaneously, the Spell's voice resounded in the black void.

[All power has a price.]

[You have received a Flaw.]

[Your Flaw is: …]

Sunny read the runes, and his eyes widened in horror.

'Oh, no. No, no, no...'

Chapter-17: Three Simple Words

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, hoping that the runes would disappear.

'Please, be gone! Please!'

But the runes were still there, shining slightly, as though mocking him.

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

Flaw Description: [You cannot lie.]

Sunny stared at these three simple words, feeling like there was a bottomless abyss opening right beneath his feet. The Spell, which was usually frivolous with its descriptions, decided to be straight and on point this time. There were only three words. They left him no room to maneuver.

'Can't lie. I can't lie? Me? How am I supposed to live if I can't lie?!'

Sunny's very survival was predicated on his ability to deceive and outsmart other people. Even the Spell itself congratulated him on his treachery! Without the ability to lie, he wouldn't be able to achieve anything.

Not to mention…

His heart suddenly felt as though it was about to stop.

If he could only tell the truth, how was he supposed to hide his True Name? Wouldn't anyone be able to turn him into an obedient slave by simply asking a couple of innocent questions?

"Sh…"

Sunny was about to scream and curse, but at that moment, the Spell spoke again.

[Wake up, Lost from Light!]

The black void spun and disappeared.

***

Sunny opened his eyes.

The armored ceiling of the police station's vault hang above him. No one would call its aesthetics beautiful, but to him, it was the most majestic sight. Only now did he realize how much he had missed the real world.

It was safe and familiar. There were no monsters or slavers… well, at least officially. There was no constant fear of torturous death.

It was home.

In addition, Sunny felt incredible. The cold that had crept deep into his bones during the Nightmare was gone, taking with it all the pain that his wounded body had been enduring day after day. His feet and wrists were not in agony, his back had forgotten the bite of the whip, and he could even breathe without feeling the sharp edges of his broken ribs cutting deeper and deeper into his lungs.

What a blessing!

The sudden disappearance of pain, coupled with the new vitality that permeated his body, almost made Sunny cry.

'I really survived.'

He slowly looked down and then froze, breathless.

On a cheap plastic chair placed beside his reinforced medical bed sat the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She had short, raven-black hair and icy blue eyes. Her flawless skin was smooth, supple and as white as snow. Actually, this was Sunny's first time meeting someone as pale as he himself was. However, while Sunny's pallor looked strange and unhealthy, the beautiful stranger was nothing short of striking.

The woman seemed to be in her late twenties. She was wearing a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and black leather boots. The jacket of her uniform was casually unbuttoned, revealing a black tank top beneath.

Currently, she was stretching her arms above her head, clearly bored and sleepy. The gesture forced the thin fabric to tighten, provocatively accentuating her full breasts.

Mesmerized, Sunny almost missed the fact that there was a shoulder insignia on the woman's left sleeve. There were three stars on it.

'Three stars, huh,' he thought, distracted. 'Three stars means an Ascended… huh… yeah. Wait. An Ascended?!'

But before Sunny could fully digest the meaning of this word, he realized that the woman was staring at him, too.

"What are you looking at?" she said, not a gram of humor in her voice.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, embarrassed, and quickly came up with an excuse. Then he opened his mouth and answered:

"Your breasts."

A second later, his eye widened in absolute horror.

Because he wasn't planning to say those words at all! His mouth moved on its own!

A wave of terror suddenly drowned his mind.

The woman slowly smiled with a dangerous gleam in her eyes. Then, without any warning, she moved her hand and slapped Sunny across the face.

Sunny whole body was turned around. If it wasn't for the restraints holding him in place, he would have probably flown off the bed. For a moment, he even saw stars.

But it could still be considered getting off lightly. An Ascended, the woman was an Ascended! She could have torn his head clean off with a flick of a finger. Why did he have to offend someone so powerful, of all people?!

Meanwhile, the woman cleared her throat and crossed her arms.

"Are you awake now?"

Sunny held his numb cheek and carefully nodded.

"Good. Let me give you a piece of advice: don't just say anything that comes to your mind. Especially to girls. It's not like you haven't seen a girl before, right?"

'Say "Thank you! I definitely will not!"' Sunny thought.

But instead, his mouth moved on its own, and he said:

"I've seen plenty... but no one as beautiful as you."

Then he flinched back, his face as red as a lobster.

The woman stared at him for a few seconds and then burst into laughter.

"I see you haven't met a lot of Awakened then. By Awakened standards, I'm below average."

Sunny glanced at her with doubt.

The woman shook her head.

"As your soul core develops, the body gets rid of all its imperfections. So it's hard to find an unattractive Awakened, especially among the stronger ones. Live long enough, and you might just become a flower boy yourself."

Then she gave him a thorough look and added:

"Well… maybe. In any case, since you're awake — welcome back to the land of the living. Congratulations on surviving your First Nightmare, Sleeper Sunless."

***

Sleeper Sunless.

That was how people would address him now, at least in the short span of days until the winter solstice — after that, he would either return from the Dream Realm as an Awakened or not return at all.

It felt strange to have a title put before his name. In the past, Sunny was rarely even addressed by name. People mostly called him things like "boy", "punk", "brat" or "hey, you!". But now he even had a title.

Sleeper Sunless…

Actually, the correct term was "Dreamer". But humans had their own set of words for those infected by the Nightmare Spell. Carriers who had just finished their First Nightmare were called Sleepers because of how they interacted with the Spell.

Basically, once his spirit enters the Spell, his body was going to fall into slumber. That slumber would continue for days, weeks, or even months — however long it takes him to escape the Dream Realm. Hence the term "Sleeper".

Once he escapes and becomes an Awakened, he would live his life normally during the day and return to the Dream Realm every time he falls asleep. The Awakened were called the same by the Spell and the humans. That word was also sometimes used as a general term for all carriers.

Then, if he were to decide to enter a Second Nightmare and managed to survive, he would become an Ascended — people called them Masters. Masters could enter and exit the Dream Realm as they wished. Some even chose to never come back there at all. More than that, they traveled between the worlds physically, not just in spirit.

And then, above the Masters, there were Saints — those who had conquered the Third Nightmare and earned the right to call themselves Transcendent. They were as powerful as demi-gods, and even more rare. Not only could they travel between the real world and the Dream Realm, but they could also take others with them.

But coming back to Masters…

The beautiful woman stood up and approached the reinforced medical bed. With practiced moves, she began to undo the restraint holding Sunny in place.

"I am Ascended Jet. You can call me Master Jet. These past three days, I was on watch duty due to your Nightmare."

'Right… before I fell asleep, the policeman told me that an Awakened would arrive in a few hours to monitor my condition. To kill the Nightmare Creature if… if I die and let it through.'

Sunny was unwilling to open his mouth, terrified that all sorts of truths would come spilling out. But there were things he simply had to know.

"Master Jet? I have a question."

"Go on."

"Why would a Master be put on watch duty? Isn't it… below your pay grade?"

Jet gave him a dark look.

"You're smarter than you seem. Recently, there was a lot of Gates opening in this sector. Most of the local Awakened are either wounded or occupied with the clean-up. Or dead. It's always like that close to the winter solstice."

She opened the final restraint and took a step back.

"Plus, there's not a lot of Awakened who, like me, directly work for the government. It's by far the least lucrative or glorious career one of us can choose. Would you abandon wealth and fame to work abysmal hours and risk your life, fuelled only by altruism and sense of duty?"

Sunny wanted to say something flattering. Instead, he looked Master Jet right in the eyes and smirked.

"Of course not. I'm not an idiot!"

'Damn this damn Flaw! Damn!'

She stared at him with a humorless expression. Sunny thought that he was going to get slapped again.

But instead, Jet smiled.

"See, I was right. You really are smart."

Chapter-18: Absence of Light

Sunny was enjoying a hot shower. After their short conversation, Master Jet had sent him to clean himself, saying that he "reeked of Nightmare". The unnatural slumber of the Spell would slow down the body's metabolism, and the medical apparatus he had been strapped into was supposed to take care of the rest, but he was still asleep for three whole days.

Even if only psychological, the scent of bloodshed and despair lingered around him.

'Ah, I'm in heaven,' Sunny thought, willing himself to temporarily forget about the looming disaster of the Flaw.

He was alone in the police station's showers, relaxing under the streams of hot water. After a bit of time had passed, Sunny reluctantly turned the tap off and walked over to the towel rack. Coincidentally, he saw himself reflecting in the mirror.

The changes in his physique were subtle, but noticeable. His pale skin seemed a little healthier, his muscles a bit more pronounced. He looked slender and lean instead of emaciated and frail, as he did before. There was a slight luster to his dark hair and a shine to his eyes.

However, he was still rather diminutive. Not exactly a picture of masculine handsomeness, to say the least.

'Flower boy, huh?' Sunny thought, full of bitterness.

Then he suddenly froze, noticing something strange. As he was looking at himself in the mirror, the reflection of his shadow seemed to move. It was as though the shadow lowered its head and quietly facepalmed.

Sunny quickly turned around, piercing his shadow with a nervous look. However, everything seemed normal. The shadow was doing exactly what it was supposed to do, repeating his every motion.

"I clearly saw you move," he said, feeling a bit strange. "You have just moved on your own, right?!"

Sunny glared at the shadow, which obediently glared back.

"Did you move or not?"

The shadow enthusiastically shook its head.

'What the?!'

"What do you mean, "no"?! You've just moved your head! Do you think I'm a fool?"

The shadow seemed to think for a bit and then shrugged.

Sunny was left with his mouth agape.

"Your shadow is more independent than most. It is an invaluable helper," he muttered finally.

Right. This was how the Spell had described his Aspect Ability.

But what exactly could his shadow do?

He decided to experiment a little.

"Hey, you. Tell me what you can do."

The shadow was silent and motionless.

'Right. It doesn't have vocal cords.'

As though that made any sense! Shadows were not supposed to have muscles either, and yet it knew how to move.

"Uh… show me?"

No reaction. It seems the shadow was content pretending to be an ordinary, lifeless blob of darkness.

Sunny sighed.

'I'm doing this wrong.'

Independent or not, the shadow was still a part of him. It was a manifestation of his Aspect Ability. So instead of asking the shadow, he really should have been asking himself.

"Not going to talk, are you?"

Sunny closed his eyes and directed his perception within, exploring himself for the first time since returning to the real world. He felt the beating of his heart, the steady rising of his chest, the slight chill of the shower room. He heard droplets of water falling on the tiled floor. Felt the movement of filtered air against his skin.

And there, on the verge of his consciousness, something new.

A completely new sense.

Sunny concentrated on it, and suddenly a whole other world opened to him. It was hard to describe with words, just like one would have trouble explaining how hearing or touch feels.

It was as though he could communicate with vast forms that crowded around him and receive an understanding of both their own shape and the surrounding space, guided by the different degrees of pressure they exerted on his mind and each other.

That understanding came naturally and instantaneously, like an instinct.

These forms were shadows. And among them, one — not the largest one, but the deepest — didn't feel like an external entity. It was like a part of his soul.

Once Sunny grasped the feeling of it, he could sense the shadow just like he sensed his limbs. The only thing was that his limbs were made out of flesh, and the shadow was made from the absence of light.

Sunny opened his eyes and looked at the shadow. Then, with a thought, he willed it to raise an arm.

The shadow raised an arm.

He willed it to sit, stand, turn around, kick. Then he willed it to change shape, turning into a circle, then a line, then a monster. And finally, back to his own silhouette. The shadow was mercurial and fluid, like water. The only constant was its size.

"Ha! How about that?"

The shadow pouted, then reluctantly raised its thumbs.

"But how are you useful?"

He willed the shadow to strike the towel rack. It obediently moved and delivered a powerful kick. Of course, since it was just a shadow, its leg passed over the towels harmlessly, not even causing them to sway a little.

"Is that… all you can do?"

In his mind, the image of shadow tentacles tearing the mighty tyrant into little pieces cracked and shattered mercilessly. It seemed he would not be competing with Shadow God any time soon.

How regretful.

The shadow looked at him with disdain. Then it shrugged and stopped moving altogether, clearly offended.

Sunny sighed and took a towel off the rack.

"Alright. I will explore it later."

***

A few minutes after that, he was wearing a clean police-issued tracksuit and heading for the cafeteria. Master Jet was waiting for him at one of the tables, with two trays full of steaming synthetic food in front of her.

"Help yourself."

Sunny glanced at the cheap gruel, which was not so different from the stuff he used to consume in the outskirts, and sighed. Somehow, he had expected his first meal after becoming a Sleeper to be more lavish.

Still, it was food.

He sat down and began to wolf down the gruel ravenously. He was very, very hungry.

In the process, his thoughts began to wander. Sunny stole a glance at Jet and wondered. The Spell told him to find a master, and the next thing he knew there was a woman calling herself Master right in front of him. He tried to imagine being an obedient slave to someone like her.

Weird thoughts started to appear in his mind…

'You know what, Sunny,' he thought with dark irony. 'Knowing your luck, this would be a perfect moment for her to ask…'

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny choked on the gruel. He felt his mouth beginning to open, and put all of his will into staying silent. A second passed without him saying anything. Then a weird pressure appeared in his mind, which soon turned into blinding pain. He endured it for a couple more seconds before giving up.

"I was thinking that it would be a perfect moment for you to ask me about what I am thinking," he finally said.

Jet gave him a weird look.

"Alright. Are you almost finished with your food?"

Sunny nodded.

"Then I'll begin. As per protocol, I am obligated to inform you of a few things. It is mostly a formality. First of all, concerning your Nightmare…"

She glanced at him and sighed.

"You are entitled to receive free psychological counseling. No matter what traumatic experience you have encountered, there is no shame in asking for help. Your mind is as important as your body — it's only right to keep it healthy. Are you interested?"

Sunny shook his head. Jet shrugged and continued:

"As you wish. You can also talk to me. Was it very hard?"

How could he answer?

"It was simultaneously much worse than I expected and exactly as bad as I expected."

She nodded, satisfied with that explanation.

"That's a good attitude. I won't pry any further. Us outskirt rats are way more resilient than people think."

Sunny looked at her in surprise.

"Master Jet… you grew up in the outskirts?"

She grinned.

"What? You can't tell because of my exquisite manners and polished exterior?"

He blinked a couple of times, surprised.

"I couldn't tell at all."

After thinking for a while, he added:

"Are there a lot of people like us among the Awakened?"

Jet's smile disappeared.

"No. There's not. In fact, they can be counted on one hand."

As expected. Odds were really stacked against people like them. That made the three stars on Jet's insignia even more exceptional.

'One day, I'll be a Master too.'

If she can do it, why can't I?

"So… what happens now? What else are you obligated to tell me?"

Sunny had no idea what he was supposed to do after leaving the police station. The winter solstice was just several weeks away.

Jet leaned back and answered:

"That's basically it. There are some additional hoops to jump through, mostly having to do with your family, but… well. I've read your file, so I know it doesn't apply. The only thing left is to decide how you will be preparing for your first journey into the Dream Realm."

She looked at her communicator and grimaced.

"I must say, your luck is exceptionally bad. There's not a lot of time at all. First of all: you are free to do what you want. No one is forcing you to make a certain decision. That

is to say, you can choose to prepare on your own, or not prepare at all. Party until the lights go out."

Sunny was not very well versed in partying.

"However, I would advise against that. As a Sleeper, you are also entitled to enroll in the Awakened Academy. You'll be provided with food, lodging and a wide choice of preparatory classes. This late into the year, you won't be able to learn a lot. But it's better than nothing."

She was silent for a few seconds, then added:

"More importantly, you will get acquainted with most of the people who will enter the Dream Realm with you. Some of them might become your companions for life."

'And some may end up trying to end that life once we're inside the Spell,' Sunny added, reading between the lines of what Master Jet had said.

"So, what do you say? Do you want me to take you to the Academy?"

Sunny thought about it. Strangely, his Flaw was silent, not forcing him to answer one way or the other.

'Is it because I haven't made up my mind yet?'

Finally, he looked down, at his empty tray, and made a decision.

Free lodging and food, you say?

"Yeah. I want to go to the Academy."

Chapter-19: Crossing the Bridge

Sunny was standing in front of the massive, seemingly indestructible red gates of the Awakened Academy. The Academy was, in fact, a city within the city. It was built like a fortress, with a high wall made of hard alloy, deep moat and numerous large-caliber turrets which were placed in certain positions to create a deadly air-suppression dome.

No Nightmare Creature, not even colossal titans, were supposed to be able to break through its defenses.

It was a legendary place. Actually, many of the most popular webtoons, youth dramas and novels took place right behind that wall. Adventures, rivalries and romantic entanglements of the young Awakened heroes were the mainstream theme of modern entertainment. Never in his wildest dreams did Sunny imagine actually becoming one of these heroes.

Of course, how things really were differed a lot from how it was portrayed in the media. More than that, he had only four weeks to spend here before venturing into the Dream Realm. Even if he wanted to, there was not enough time for any type of entanglement. And he definitely did not want to.

He had to learn how to survive, not waste time on such nonsense!

The snow was slowly falling to the ground. It was cold and silent in front of the Academy gates. Except for Sunny, there was only one other person — another new Sleeper, if he had to guess.

It was a tall, slender girl of around his age, with clear grey eyes and a detached look on her face. She had strange, silver-white hair that was cut short and neatly parted to the side. Just like him, she was dressed in a police-issued tracksuit and had no personal belongings with her. On her head, there was a pair of old-fashioned headphones. She was calmly listening to music while they waited.

There was a certain vibe to the silver-haired girl. It was sort of… as though she was apart from the world. She looked confident and self-sufficient, but also a bit lonely.

Sunny wasn't going to start a conversation. Who knew what kind of situation he would put himself in due to that damn Flaw? It was better to keep to himself.

He glanced at the girl and sighed.

'I wonder what Flaw does she have?'

Finally, the gates began to open. The giant, ridiculously thick sheet of reinforced metal slowly descended, creating a long bridge. Sunny looked ahead with grim determination.

Master Jet's parting words echoed in his mind.

***

On their drive to the Academy, Sunny didn't speak much, looking at the sights of the city that were flying past the window of Jet's personal transport vehicle. Actually, it was his first time sitting in a PTV: most people in the city couldn't even dream about getting a license and purchasing a vehicle like that, having to do with public transportation.

He had ridden in the back of a police cruiser once or twice, but that was a completely different experience.

At some point, Master Jet looked at him and said:

"Since we both come from the outskirts, I'll give you three pieces of advice. Whether you listen to me or not is your business."

Sunny turned his head, waiting.

"First: once you're registered in the Academy, they'll offer you psychological counseling again. There will also be a valuable reward for sharing your experiences in the Nightmare and the details of your Appraisal. You'll be able to receive a soul shard, maybe even several of them."

He frowned.

"Are you trying to convince me to visit a psychiatrist again?"

Jet shook her head.

"No. I'm telling you to refuse."

Surprised, Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Why?"

There was a pause before she answered.

"You're too green to understand, but out there in the Dream Realm, Nightmare Creatures are not the only danger. Once you grow powerful enough, humans will become an equal threat. The less they know about your Aspect, the better."

So that's how it is.

"The easiest way to defeat a powerful Awakened is to use their Flaw. That's why young fools in the Academy are encouraged in various ways to share the details of their Aspects. I'm not saying that the government will leak your information, but once two people know a secret, it's no longer a secret. And there's a lot of people working for the government."

That made a lot of sense.

"Thank you, Master Jet."

She gave him a nod.

"Second: there will be a lot of courses to choose from. All types of combat training, deep dives into Nightmare Creature categories and vulnerabilities, basics of various types of sorcery, artifact study and so on."

Sunny gulped. Actually, he was already agonizing about what weapon to train with. Four weeks was not enough to master a weapon, but at least he would have a basic understanding of it.

"Disregard all of that. The only course you have time to attend is Wilderness Survival."

He blinked.

"What?"

Jet glanced at him.

"It's different for city kids, who learn all sorts of useful things in school and from their tutors. But we don't have that advantage, do we? What was the biggest threat to your life during the Nightmare?"

Sunny thought about it. On the surface, the most dangerous thing he faced was the tyrant, followed by Hero… Auro of the Nine. But actually, what almost killed him in the end was…

"The cold."

Jet smiled.

"Smart. You only know how to survive in the city. But the Dream Realm is mostly made of wilderness. Do you know how to make a fire? How to procure food? How to find safe shelter?

No. Fighting monsters is important, but it'll be useless if you die of hunger or exposure to the elements. Trust me. I've learned it the hard way."

Sunny nodded, angry at himself. It was so obvious, yet he never even thought about these seemingly simple things. He was blinded by his past habits and experience.

Human brains were like that: once accustomed to a certain way of living, it was hard to see past the already familiar routines. It was lazy thinking at its worst.

At that point, Master Jet had stopped the car and opened the door, getting out. Sunny followed her and was momentarily stunned, staring at the colossal metal gates in front of them.

This was… the famous Awakened Academy.

After a few seconds, he shook off his amazement and turned to his senior.

"This is as far as I go," she said, looking cheerlessly at the walls of the Academy. "I've already notified them. Someone will come fetch you in a while."

There was something dark in the depths of her icy blue eyes. Sunny suddenly felt a cold feeling spreading through his body.

"What's the third advice?"

Master Jet glanced at him, then sighed.

"Remember: no one can survive in the Dream Realm alone. That's not an opinion, that's a fact. Try to get along with your peers, even if they don't treat you well. It might save your life."

Then she suddenly smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

"You've done well to survive until now. Make sure to keep yourself alive in the future, too."

Then she got back into her PTV and drove off. Just like that, she was gone.

***

The end of the metal bridge hit the special grooves in the ground and stopped moving after a set of loud clicks. Sunny looked ahead, wondering what kind of life he was going to be living in the next four weeks.

Keep your Flaw and Aspect secret, learn to survive in the wilderness, be nice to other Sleepers. It didn't sound too hard.

But, for some reason, he was sure that these weeks were going to be as challenging as his First Nightmare. Or maybe even worse.

Seemingly free of such concerns, the silver-haired girl walked forward and stepped on the bridge.

Sunny sighed and reluctantly followed.

Chapter-20: Outcast Once Again

The Sleeper part of the compound was relatively small and situated in the southern part of the Academy, surrounded on all sides by training fields and parks.

It was a low, modern building constructed with reinforced materials. Like the majority of buildings in the Academy, most of it was hidden below the ground, leaving only a couple of floors above it. With its white, pristine alloy walls and wide windows, it must have looked beautiful in the summer, contrasted against all the greenery around.

Inside, the building was spacious and well-lit. Sunny and the silver-haired girl were taken to a large hall where a hundred or so of young men and women — Sleepers of the same unfortunate timing as the two of them — were already waiting for the beginning of the induction ceremony. Most of them were nervous, tense and excited.

Logistics of the Academy were a constant headache for the administrators since the rate at which the Spell infected people was always chaotic. There was no way to orderly structure for batches of Sleepers to undergo any type of standardized education on a shared schedule: some of them had a full year to prepare for the Dream Realm, some only months, some even mere days.

That's why these induction ceremonies were held each month at the beginning of the year and then every week once the winter solstice began to loom near. Some of the Sleepers in the hall had to wait days to be inducted, while Sunny had lucked out and was delivered to the Academy just hours before the scheduled event.

Once inside the hall, he understood two things.

Firstly, everyone was well-dressed and in possession of a suitcase, a duffel bag, or at least a backpack carrying their personal belongings. They were obviously coming prepared, most likely from home, sent off by their families.

So Sunny and the silver-haired girl, who came empty-handed and wearing simple police-issued clothes, were not a norm like he had assumed, but actually an eye-catching anomaly.

'Right. That makes sense.'

Secondly, Master Jet was not being overly humble when she called herself below average by Awakened standards. Even though these young people were just starting their paths as Awakened, their looks were dazzling. Everyone was handsome, beautiful and radiated health.

He swallowed.

'Still, I feel like none of them compare. She might not be as perfectly shaped, but… I don't know… she has a presence. It's like shadows become deeper and the temperature drops by a couple of degrees when she's in a room.'

Was this the difference between a Sleeper and a Master?

But all of these thoughts were just him trying to postpone the inevitable. Sunny already knew that he was in for a wild ride.

Because he could not lie, and all of these excited youths, regardless of their clothes, gender and looks, wanted to do one thing.

Talk.

Every one of them wanted to talk with fellow Sleepers. They wanted to discuss their Nightmares, their future journey into the Dream Realm, and everything in between. They wanted to ask questions. They wanted to be asked questions. They wanted to discuss something important or just chit-chat about stupid things.

Everyone wanted to share.

'It's a nightmare!' Sunny moaned, disturbed and fearful. 'I'm doomed!'

Then, with a bit of grim determination, he gritted his teeth and slowly exhaled.

'Just think about it as a continuation of your trial. You survived the black mountain, so you can survive this, too.'

He had faced heroes, villains, monsters and even gods. Was he going to be afraid of a bunch of teenagers?

…He might have underestimated how scary teenagers can be.

In half an hour, pretty much everyone in the room hated his guts.

After a short series of conversations, Sunny had acquired a reputation of an obnoxious, foul-mouthed pervert. This reputation was quickly solidified. He was slapped a few times and even punched once. He also discovered a couple of new things about his true self — namely, that deep down inside he was apparently rude, arrogant, and more than a little bit lustful.

The conversations went something like this:

"Look at all these young people. How many do you think will return from the Dream Realm? How many will perish? What do you think our own chances of survival are?"

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure that a pompous fool like you will die first!"

Or:

"I even received an armor-type Memory in my Nightmare. It's an enchanted robe. Would you like to see?"

"Actually, I would prefer to see you without a robe…"

Or:

"Then those lowlifes began to rob the bodies. It was disgusting! They even took their shoes! What kind of degenerate would take a dead man's shoes?"

"I once killed a man and took his boots. They were nice boots."

"... What? You killed someone just for a pair of boots?"

"Of course not! There were other reasons. I also took his cloak."

Once again an outcast, Sunny was eventually left alone. People seemed to be avoiding him. Unperturbed, he found a quiet corner and stood there, glad that no one wanted to talk to him anymore. His face hurt, and there was blood dripping from his nose. Being ostracised from a group was nothing new, but it still stung.

However, he was smiling.

Because in the process of turning the whole batch of Sleepers against himself, Sunny had discovered something vital.

He learned how to control his Flaw.

Once asked a question, he could not keep quiet. He also couldn't lie. However, after a lot of experimentation, Sunny had found out that with a bit of practice, he could influence the exact way the truth eventually came out.

It was like this: after receiving a question, his mind automatically produced a truthful answer. After that, the Flaw would force him to say that answer aloud. Refusal to speak would result in the buildup of pressure, then piercing pain. The longer he kept quiet, the worse the pain would become. Eventually, he would have to surrender and reveal the truth.

However, in these moments between receiving the question and surrendering to the pain, the actual wording of the answer could be changed. The more it strayed from the initial thought, the more resistance he would meet — once again in the form of pressure, then pain. It still had to be truthful, but it didn't have to be so stark.

For example, if Master Jet were to catch him staring again and ask what he was looking at, instead of embarrassing himself Sunny would have been able to endure a bit of pain and simply say "You."

That would still be the truth, however, the result would be entirely different.

Hidden in the corner, Sunny grinned as he observed the Sleepers.

'This is good. This is great. This is something I can work with!'

After all, one didn't have to lie to deceive a person. Sometimes, truth was the best material for creating deceit.

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If used with a certain devious type of intelligence, truth could be as misleading as lies. For example, in one of his previous conversations, Sunny had confessed that he had once stolen boots from a dead man. The other guy was horrified and asked if he had really killed someone just for a pair of boots.

The answer the Flaw forced him to give was that there were other reasons and that he had also taken the man's cloak.

The true reason for killing the veteran slaver was that he had whipped Sunny a few hours prior. Besides, he was already dying. The cloak had nothing to do with the killing itself. However, the wording of the answer created an impression that it did.

Thus, two truthful statements, when put together, created an effect akin to a lie.

This was just a simple example. With a lot of effort and intense thinking, Sunny could create other types of manipulative truths. It was going to be extremely difficult and risky, but it could be done.

He just needed a bit of luck.

It was time to put his theory to practice.

Sunny didn't forget what his main goal was — to make sure that no one ever finds out his True Name. To achieve that, he had to create an impression that he was the most pathetic, weak person in this whole building. Someone who would never receive a positive appraisal, let alone a divine Aspect and a True Name.

However, since this would be a lie, he couldn't just go and say it.

So how was he to convince everyone that he definitely did not have a powerful Aspect and an impressive record with the Spell?

His eyes fell on a particular group of Sleepers. There were five or six of them, gathered around a tall, confident young man.

The young man had brown hair and a gentle, handsome face. His eyes were green, with a hint of friendly humor. His posture, figure and attentive gaze betrayed someone who went through extensive training. Everything about the young man screamed of nobility and strength.

Just at that moment, one of his companions was saying with a tone of amazement:

"Ascended? You have received an Ascended Aspect? What… what was your Appraisal?!"

The young man smiled humbly.

"Oh. It was "excellent."

Sunny stopped in front of the group, as though by accident. After hearing the young man's answer, he frowned and looked at him with disdain.

Then, with a voice full of utter bewilderment, Sunny said:

"Ascended, excellent? That's it? What's the big deal?"

Chapter-21: First Performance

His words hung in silence. The Sleepers looked at Sunny with a hilarious assortment of emotions, ranging from bewilderment to shock. The young man with humorous eyes just smiled politely.

To be honest, getting an Ascended Aspect during the First Nightmare was extremely rare. He was certainly someone special, maybe even outstanding. Actually, despite their apparent differences, the young man somehow reminded Sunny of Hero… Auro of the Nine.

There was a special type of calculating coldness hidden deep inside their eyes. He had encountered such people before, mostly among the veterans of various street gangs in the outskirts.

They simply called this type of coldness "murder math". Basically, it was a habit experienced fighters developed — no matter where they were and what mood they were in, there was always a sober part of their minds constantly calculating the most efficient way of killing the person in front of them, just in case such need arises.

'Ugh. Why do I have to antagonize someone like that, of all people?'

But Sunny really had no grounds to complain. After all, he brought this on himself.

After a few seconds, one of the young man's companions finally blinked and said:

"Uh… friend, you must not know a lot about the Spell. Caster's results are truly remarkable."

Then, with a furtive glance at the remarkable Caster, he added:

"He is a Legacy, after all."

An actual, living and breathing descendent of an Awakened clan? Sunny reevaluated his opinion of the humorous young man. Legacies were known to be trained for their

eventual entrance into the Spell from the moment they could walk. For them, being infected was a certainty instead of a possibility.

They were extremely formidable people.

'Just great!' he thought bitterly and made his frown deepen.

"Are you trying to pull a prank on me? You call this remarkable?!"

The bewilderment in the eyes of these Sleepers was slowly being replaced by hostility.

"Listen, friend. If you don't think that an Ascended Aspect is remarkable, then please share with us your own amazing results! What, pray tell, was your Appraisal?"

Caster himself was still keeping quiet and smiling. However, his defenders were growing restless.

This was exactly what Sunny wanted to happen. He smiled with utter contempt.

"I would let you know… my Appraisal was, uh, it was "glorious"! Yes, glorious. And the Aspect I acquired was of the Divine rank."

After that, he received a number of strange looks. No one had ever received a Divine Aspect before; so, of course, they were starting to think that he was a lunatic. But there was still a sliver of doubt… maybe that strange guy was a descendant of a powerful clan? A peerless prodigy? Maybe his Appraisal was, indeed, glorious…

Sunny had to dispel that tiny bit of doubt.

"Mind you, I'm not some lofty Legacy. Pfft! I'm from the outskirts. I've never even received combat training. All that training and he only got an "excellent"? What did he do during the Nightmare, pick his nose the whole time?"

The expressions of all the Sleepers that were listening to his bragging instantly changed. An outskirt rat with no training… yeah, sure. Who was he trying to fool?

Finally, with the same polite smile, Caster spoke:

"Glorious? That is interesting. Would you mind telling us what were your achievements in the Nightmare?"

Sunny grinned.

"Sure, no problem! First of all, I killed an… uh… an awakened tyrant."

Every "uh" cost him a couple of moments of intense pain, but he didn't let it show on his face. His expression was nothing but smug and confrontational.

The mere mention of a tyrant, let alone an awakened one, made a couple of Sleepers smile with ridicule.

"Oh, really? How did you kill it?"

An arrogant look appeared on Sunny's face.

"How? Let me tell you, I didn't even have to lift a finger. I just spat, and it was torn to pieces!"

Which was true. Sunny had spat a mouthful of blood on the altar, and as the result, Mountain King was ruthlessly dismembered by Shadow God.

Someone openly laughed.

"This guy is either insane or purposefully messing with us. Listen here, shorty. Have some decency, okay? Who would believe such a lie?"

Sunny was genuinely angry. He wanted to retort, saying that he wasn't short. But he couldn't.

Because that would be a lie, damn it!

So, instead, he just gritted his teeth and said with a voice full of outrage:

"I can't answer that, because it's not a lie!"

"Are you really insisting that you had killed an awakened tyrant — a tyrant! — and with a bit of spit no less?"

Sunny knitted his brows.

"That's the truth!"

More laughter followed.

"Crazy bastard!"

"He actually believes in his own crap!"

"Insane, he's insane…"

Unexpectedly, Caster stopped his companions.

"Guys."

After the laughter quieted down, he asked in a friendly manner:

"What else did you achieve?"

What? That wasn't enough? Sunny raised his chin.

"Let me think… Oh! I also killed an awakened swordsman."

"Really? How did you do that?

Acting as though he was a little bit embarrassed, Sunny looked down.

"That… actually, that time I had to lift a finger. I even had to shake it a couple of times. That was enough to kill him, though."

He was holding the Silver Bell between his fingers, which led to Hero being attacked and eventually killed by the tyrant. So, technically, all his statements were true.

"What a crackpot!"

"Ha! Can you believe this idiot?!"

"Poor bastard. Not only is he weak, he's also lost it…"

Caster gave his companions a long look and then turned to Sunny.

"Anything else?"

Sunny blinked. Time for the finishing touch…

"Something else? Uh… Well. Oh, right! I communicated with a bunch of gods, even though they were all dead. I made one of them wake up. He gave me a blessing!

I was blessed by a god, do you all understand?!"

The Sleepers were silently shaking their heads or looking at him with pity. Caster sighed.

"I see. Well, in comparison to your achievements, mine do look rather average. Thank you for sharing with us. I hope you'll be as successful once we enter the Dream Realm."

Sunny smiled with a look of smug superiority on his face.

"You better believe it!"

With that, he turned around and walked away.

'Ah. That's a job well done.'

He was pretty sure that after this performance, no one would ever believe that he actually had some kind of a powerful Aspect or did anything worthy of notice during the Nightmare. He only told them the truth, and yet managed to make everyone believe in the opposite of the truth.

Such an incredible feeling.

What did they think of him now? They thought that he was weak, grew up without any education in the outskirts, and had no training. More than that, he was apparently either insane or incredibly stupid. His temper was terrible.

Truly pathetic and pitiful fellow.

Now, whenever he was asked about his Aspect, he could just honestly say that it was of the Divine rank, and be laughed at. People would rather believe that the Spell had ceased to exist than that he was someone noteworthy. He could even scream about his accomplishments from the roof, and no one would believe him.

Subsequently, no one would ever suspect that he had a True Name.

'Just you wait, fools. One day I'll be the one laughing.'

As Sunny was walking away, he heard one of the Sleepers talking to Caster:

"Why didn't you put that lunatic in his place? He has belittled you!"

After a short pause, Caster answered. His voice sounded low and mellow.

"Poor kid must have lost his mind in the Nightmare. It often happens. He'll most likely die soon, so being kind is the least I can do…"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

'What a nice guy.'

He knew that Caster's words were based on a false assumption, but, for some reason, still felt a cold chill running up his spine.

Chapter-22: Corpse Corner

Satisfied with his performance, Sunny walked back to the deserted corner of the hall. He felt people looking at him with mockery, contempt and pity. No one seemed to be willing to stay close to him. It was just as well: he didn't want to be bothered anyway.

Still, weren't their reactions a bit exaggerated? It's not like he was carrying an infectious disease. Well, except for the Spell. But it wasn't really a disease, which everyone here should have known already.

Finally, he extricated himself from the crowd and reached the corner. For some reason, Sleepers were unwilling to approach it: currently, there was only one girl sitting quietly on the bench. Sunny gave her a look.

The quiet girl was delicate, demure and very pretty. Her clothes were tidy and neat. They weren't very expensive, but still rather tasteful. With her pale blond hair, big blue eyes and exquisite face, she looked like a beautiful porcelain doll.

She was subtly breathtaking.

However, there was something wrong with her. Sunny frowned, trying to understand what exactly about the girl made him uncomfortable. After a while, he realized that her empty, expressionless stare was reminding him of Mountain King.

Startled, Sunny understood that the girl was blind. It took him a couple of seconds to compose himself.

'What a shame.'

A bit disheartened, he carefully sat on the opposite end of the bench.

The girl wouldn't have survived the First Nightmare if she had been blind prior to entering the Spell. Which meant that she lost her sight as the result of the Appraisal.

It was her Flaw.

Suddenly, Sunny felt very apprehensive. A cold sensation spread through his chest.

'And I thought my Flaw was bad.'

No matter what Aspect Ability the blind girl had received in exchange for her sight, it was effectively a death sentence. A blind person had no chances of surviving in the Dream Realm, at least not with a dormant core. In some sense, the girl was already dead.

She was effectively a walking corpse.

Feeling extremely disturbed, Sunny turned away and studied the crowd of Sleepers. Now he understood why people were trying to avoid this corner: the girl was surrounded by an invisible, but almost palpable aura of death.

Sleepers usually weren't very superstitious, but anyone would feel uncomfortable in her company.

Armed with this knowledge, Sunny suddenly saw a pattern in how the young people in the hall were grouped. Instinctively, they all tried to stand close to those of their own circumstance.

At the far end of the hall, closest to the stage, were one or two small groups. People in these groups were distinct from the rest of Sleepers. They were all confident, calm and had an air of readiness. These were the Legacies: they were trained for the Spell since birth and had the highest chances of survival. Caster especially stood out from the rest.

Next to them was a larger number of expensively dressed young people. They were lively and excited, and only a little nervous. They were the scions of rich and high-ranking citizens. Their training was pretty good since such families had ample funds to hire private tutors — even Awakened ones. Their chances of survival weren't bad.

Then there was the largest part of the crowd, which consisted of kids from middle-class families. They might not have had the privilege of training under Awakened tutors, but their education wasn't bad. The government spent a lot of effort to put all the necessary knowledge and skills into the school curriculum, preparing potential Sleepers in advance.

Some of them might have received additional training in private. To survive, these Sleepers would need to put in a valiant effort, and also have a bit of luck. But it wasn't improbable. Consequently, they were tense and nervous.

And lastly, there was Sunny and the blind girl. The corpses. From the point of view of other Sleepers in the hall, their chances of survival were close to zero.

'How charming.'

This was how the young Sleepers had subconsciously divided themselves. The only exception from this rule was the silver-haired girl, who stood alone and apart from everyone, seemingly indifferent to tension and nervousness that permeated the air. She was leaning against a wall with her eyes closed, still listening to music.

But regardless of their group and level of training, everyone was already tired of waiting.

'When will the damn induction ceremony start?' Sunny thought, irritated.

As though answering his thoughts, a tall man in a dark blue uniform appeared on the stage. Not only was he tall, he was actually almost a giant. Sunny even wondered if the man's mother had sinned with a bear…

Of course, it was impossible — bears had gone extinct long before the Spell even appeared. But he once saw pictures in a book, and they looked sort of similar.

'A bear-like Nightmare Creature, then.'

The giant man had wide shoulders, an athletic build and a gorgeous brown beard. His eyes were calm and serious. After reaching the center of the stage, he gave Sleepers a long look. When his gaze reached the deserted corner, Sunny suddenly felt nervous.

'Uh… I sure hope he doesn't have a telepathic Ability. Otherwise, he might separate me from a limb or two on behalf of his mother.'

The man didn't pay Sunny a lot of attention and returned his gaze to the front rows of the crowd. Finally, he said in a deep, reverberating voice:

"I am Awakened Rock. Sleepers, welcome to the Academy."

Everyone listened without making a sound.

"In less than a month, you will be summoned to the Dream Realm. Some of you might think that you are well prepared. You're wrong. The Spell is merciless and cunning. The moment Awakened begin to think too much of themselves, they die. I've seen countless Sleepers like you lose their lives.

I've also seen experienced Masters lose theirs. Even Saints are not assured to survive."

'Thanks for the encouragement,' Sunny thought sarcastically.

"In the following four weeks, we will do everything in our power to increase your chances of survival. You will receive training from the best instructors in the world. However, don't be misled by their fame: in the end, whether you return from the Dream Realm alive depends only on one person — you. The responsibility to survive is yours, and yours alone. "

Except for the Legacies, Sleepers were looking at each other with growing fear in their eyes. Awakened Rock continued:

"You are not children anymore. It's a shame, because you ought to be. But the Spell has decided otherwise. You have been to the First Nightmare, so you already know what it's like. Your parents, your teachers and your friends can't help you anymore…"

'Haven't had any of those in a long time.'

While listening to Rock's speech, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little excluded. It was all old news to him. However, he understood the instructor's purpose: he had to make young Sleepers afraid, because fear was the only thing that would keep them alive.

Finally, the speech got to the important part. Awakened Rock paused, giving kids listening to him a few moments to digest his words. Then, with a short nod, he continued:

"Now we will talk about the difference between Nightmares and the Dream Realm…"

Chapter-23: Dreams and Nightmares

That was something Sunny was keenly interested in.

Of course, he had a general knowledge of how things were set inside the Spell. But the First Nightmare had already shown him that reality was different from how it was portrayed in popular culture in a number of small, but infinitely important ways.

He needed to separate truth from the myths. And, of course, it was very advantageous to hear it from the mouth of someone who had actually been to the Dream Realm. So Sunny was all ears.

Awakened Rock began to speak:

"Most people are aware of what Nightmares are — because they have an impact on the real world and their lives. All of you have been warned before entering the First Nightmare that, should you perish there, a Nightmare Creature would be allowed to cross the threshold and enter reality."

Yup, that was the reason why Master Jet had to wait patiently by his side, prepared to deal with the monster if it appears.

"First Nightmares are unique, because each of them is individual. That's why only a single Creature can appear. However, starting from the Second Nightmare, things become much more dangerous. These Nightmares are not tied to an infected person. Instead, they are born in the Dream Realm. While the Seed of the Nightmare is growing, any number of Awakened can attempt to conquer it."

Hunting down Nightmares was the main responsibility of the Awakened. Sunny knew that much.

"Should they all die or fail to find the Seed before it matures, a Gate will open in the real world, letting through countless monsters. You all know the consequences. Other Awakened will be forced to withstand the onslaught on this side, but then there can be massive destruction or losses among the civilian population."

Opening Gates were something that every person on the planet feared. It was also the second disaster brought upon by the Spell after the initial appearance of the Nightmare Creatures. The main difference was that, in that initial wave, there were only dormant beasts. However, Gates had ranks of their own, and any type of Creature could potentially step through.

Not long before Sunny was born, a Rank 5 Gate opening left a whole continent uninhabitable. Luckily, high-rank Gates were very rare.

Awakened Rock's voice grew solemn.

"So it is not wrong to say that the purpose of the Awakened is to enter the Dream Realm, seek out maturing Nightmares and close them before any harm could befall the real world. From this, you can see that the Dream Realm and the Nightmares are connected, but are not one and the same. If Nightmares are the destination, then the Dream Realm is the road. But it is also so much more."

'Very romantic. Does Awakened Rock have poetic inclinations?'

"Simply put, the Dream Realm is a world. It is vast, mysterious and mostly unexplored. It is also dead. There is no life out there except for the Nightmare Creatures, corrupted ecosystems… and now us. But it wasn't always dead. We can tell that once, a long time ago, the Dream Realm was home to several primitive civilizations.

There are a lot of ruins buried in its soil."

From what Sunny knew, those lost civilizations were not really primitive, it's just that their development was centered around soul cores and mysticism as opposed to technology. So, basically, miracles and magic. What were their names? How did they fall? No one knew.

Maybe they were destroyed by the Spell.

"We don't know if the Dream Realm exists inside the Spell as one of its illusions, just on an unimaginably larger scale, or if it's real, with the Spell only serving as a pathway between two realities. However, we do suspect that the illusions conjured up inside the Nightmares are based on its history. They are replicas of past events, somehow reconstructed from the depths of time."

So, there might have been a real slave caravan on that black mountain once, a long time ago. Sunny remembered how time seemed to move in reverse at the beginning of his Nightmare. He thought about how things would have ended up without his involvement.

Did the nameless temple slave perish in Mountain King's maw with the rest of the caravan?

Somehow, he felt that the nameless slave was not that simple. Otherwise, why would the Spell remember him? And what about Hero? Was he able to escape?

'I wonder.'

"There are four main differences between the Dream Realm and the Nightmares. Firstly, it doesn't have a "story". There is no predetermined conflict you are forced to resolve. You can move freely and explore, provided that you have the strength to stay alive in the wilderness. Most people tend to stay close to one of the human Citadels."

'That's good to know,' Sunny thought, unconvinced.

Sure, there were no predetermined conflicts in the Dream Realm. But with his [Fated] attribute, he was pretty certain to end up in some kind of trouble. So that freedom Awakened Rock had mentioned was relative in his case.

Meanwhile, the instructor continued:

"Secondly, as I have already mentioned, there are no people in the Dream Realm except for those who came from the real world. There are only monsters. Some of them can mimic human appearance, though, so be mindful of that."

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. Nightmare Creatures mimicking humans? So creepy! Since when was that a thing? Why hasn't he ever heard about it?

He stole a glance at the Legacies standing in the first row and noticed that they did not show any sign of surprise. So, they knew.

"Thirdly, unlike the First Nightmare, no Nightmare Creatures will appear in the real world if you die in the Dream Realm. It may sound cruel, but that's a good thing. Awakened forces are already spread thin. If we had to monitor every Sleeper, we wouldn't have resources to handle more important matters."

Considering that each Sleeper could spend weeks, sometimes even months in the Dream Realm, there was ruthless logic in that statement.

"And lastly, and most importantly. Unlike Nightmares, which are bound by the rules of fairness, there is no limit to what kind of Creature you can meet in the Dream Realm.

During its trials, the Spell won't pit a dormant human against an opponent many ranks above them…"

'Oh really?' Sunny sneered.

However, he was forced to agree with Awakened Rock. Even though both Hero and Mountain King were way out of his league, they were still just one rank above him.

"... But in the Dream Realm, no such restrictions exist. Theoretically, you can stumble upon an Unholy Titan and die before even realizing what happened. So be careful and stick to the regions with enemies on par with your own rank. It's not an ironclad guarantee, but at least there will be less of a chance of you biting off more than you can chew."

Sticking to a region populated by Nightmare Creatures below his rank was even better. That was exactly what Sunny was planning to do.

Awakened Rock paused for a few moments, studying the faces of Sleepers in front of him. Then he added:

"When the solstice comes, you will be drawn into the Dream Realm. The exact location of where you will appear can't be predicted in advance, but there is a high chance that many of you will find yourselves in close proximity to each other. Band together and proceed to the nearest human Citadel. Each Citadel is built around a Gateway. Once you reach it, you will be able to return."

Gateways were special portals that served as exit points from the Dream Realm. Once Sleepers reached such a portal, they would be able to escape back to reality and become Awakened. Their core would evolve, and they would also receive a second Aspect Ability. After that, they would return to the Dream Realm each time they fall asleep.

"If you can't locate or are unable to reach the nearest human Citadel, search for an unclaimed Gateway. It will usually be inside or near the most prominent landmark of the region. Work together to defeat its guardians and come back alive."

He gave them a heavy look.

"That is all for today. Next, follow the instructions sent to your communicators to find your assigned dormitory. Once settled, you may proceed to the cafeteria for some late supper. There will be a round of interviews after that, to prepare your suggested curriculums. Get a good night's rest. Your training starts tomorrow."

With that, he gave them a short nod and left.

Sunny sighed.

'Can't be predicted in advance, huh?'

With his luck, he would either drop right in the middle of a prosperous human Citadel and immediately roll into a Gateway, or appear in some region of the Dream Realm so remote and deadly that no one had ever heard about it or returned from it alive.

'Let's hope for the former.'

Since he couldn't do anything about it, Sunny wasn't very worried. There was something much more important on his mind — what, exactly, do they serve here for supper…

Chapter-24: Moving Up in the World

Everything having to do with Sleepers was situated in the same building. Sunny followed the instructions sent to his communicator and quickly found the dormitories, which were situated on one of the lowest levels. To his surprise, he actually got a whole room to himself.

It had a bed with a soft mattress, a table, a dresser, and even a separate bathroom! The materials were new and aesthetically pleasing, the air crisp and sterile. It was warm inside, and the outer wall was equipped with a hidden screen that seamlessly imitated a wide window, opening to a picturesque vista of a snowy park.

There were even several sets of clothes with the Academy emblem provided to him for free.

'How extravagant,' Sunny thought, a little stunned.

Rationally, he understood that such an arrangement was not really luxurious. However, to him, who grew up wandering the outskirts, this room was like a palace. He scratched his head.

'Looks like… I've made it?'

Sunny glanced around, then winked at his shadow and smiled.

"I guess we're moving up in the world, huh?"

The shadow didn't respond, apparently not very impressed. Perhaps it didn't care about such things.

'Right, what would a stupid shadow know?'

Sunny changed into new clothes and studied himself in the mirror. Then, remembering something, he summoned the runes.

He finally had time to study the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Memory: [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [A worm of doubt once found its way into a righteous king's heart. With time, the king was devoured from inside and became its puppet. A lifetime later, the Puppeteer Worm escaped from the king's dead body, leaving behind a cocoon of black silk.

No one knows where it went; however, once people dared to approach the silent castle, they found the silk among the mountains of gnawed bones and fashioned it into an armor.]

Sunny made a sour face.

'That is not that terrifying. Yeah. I'm not creeped out at all.'

Come to think of it, the first creature he killed was called a larva. If he were to assume that Mountain King was a mature Puppeteer Worm — and already a tyrant… then what the hell would it transform into after becoming a moth?

No, it's better not to think about it.

With a sigh, he summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. Thin black threads immediately appeared around his body and wrapped it into a set of armor. It was made of dark-gray, soft fabric with several elements, such as bracers and shoulder guards, fashioned out of black, lusterless leather.

The armor was light, understated and did not restrain his movements at all. It also made no sound when he moved. Perfect equipment for someone who likes to lurk in the shadows!

Sunny smiled. He knew that this armor would be tough to pierce for any Creature below the Awakened rank, which gave him a great advantage in dealing with all dormant monsters. He also felt a sort of strange, faint calmness while wearing it.

'A worm of doubt… does it have enhanced protection against mental attacks?'

Somehow, he was sure of it.

A great trophy! He wouldn't expect anything less from the Memory of a powerful tyrant.

The only problem was that the Puppeteer's Shroud was obviously not meant to be worn on top of a full set of clothes. Quite satisfied, Sunny dismissed it and left his room, heading for the cafeteria.

'Not bad, not bad,' he thought, recalling all the rewards he had received during and after the First Nightmare.

The supper turned out to be as lavish as the dormitory. Sunny's wish to taste real meat finally came true: not only was it freely available to Sleepers, there wasn't even a limit to the amount each of them could eat! More than that, there were rice, bread, various side dishes, sauces, fresh vegetables, fruits, and all kinds of delicious beverages.

'Extravagant!' Sunny thought, steering clear of the coffee.

After building a small mountain of food on his plate, he found an empty seat and, for a while, forgot about the world's existence. As juicy, textured, perfectly seasoned meat filled his mouth, Sunny's vision suddenly was full of stars. He had to hold back an exhilarated moan.

And to think, he could have lived like that for a whole year!

'Damn Spell… why didn't you infect me a few months ago?'

He concentrated on the food, decimating the whole plate in no time. Satiated and more than a little gorged, Sunny longingly looked back and thought about getting another serving. But it was already time for his appointment with the Academy personnel.

Full of regret, he stood up and left the cafeteria.

Soon, he found himself in a small office, sitting across from an administrative worker. The worker was very friendly, and started the interview right away.

Just like Master Jet had warned him, Sunny was offered psychological counseling again. Remembering her advice, he refused, and the interview smoothly switched to questions about his Aspect.

He didn't want to give up information about his abilities, but also knew that he had to tell the worker something. Luckily, the questions were worded in a way to put Sleepers at ease. As such, most of them started with nice and polite preambles like "would you like to tell me" or "if you're willing to share", which gave Sunny an opportunity to give neutral answers.

"Would you mind telling me about the type of Aspect Ability you received, as in combat, sorcery, utility?"

He did mind, but had to be careful.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I haven't had time to understand it well."

"That's alright. Are you able to directly deal damage with your Ability?"

"I guess not? Earlier, I wasn't even able to harm a towel."

Things went on like that. In the end, Sunny shared just enough information to create an impression that his Aspect was weak, harmless and most likely having something to do with utility.

After that, he returned to his room, undressed, and went to sleep.

Sunny thought that falling asleep for the first time after the Nightmare would be weird, but in fact, it was surprisingly easy. Lying on a soft mattress, with his skin against clean bedsheets and a fluffy pillow under his head, he slept like a baby.

***

Early in the morning, Sunny washed up in his private bathroom and, bursting with energy, hurried to get breakfast in a happy mood.

The cafeteria was a bit crowded. After filling his plate with all kinds of delicious stuff, he quickly realized that the only place he could sit was near the blind girl from yesterday. Her table was empty, since no one wanted to be close to her.

Sunny grimaced. It seemed that the two of them were doomed to be outcasts together for the remaining four weeks. He also felt uncomfortable in the company of someone who was practically a dead person, but there wasn't much of a choice.

Losing his good mood, he sat at the blind girl's table and gave a percursory nod to the social worker who was helping her get around. After that, he tried to pretend that they didn't exist and concentrated on his food.

However, before he could finish, a sudden commotion drew his attention.

'What's going on?'

He looked up and noticed that a lot of Sleepers were gathered around the large screen hanging on the wall of the cafeteria, their faces filled with excitement and awe. On the screen, a list of names was displayed, ranking the new batch of Sleepers from weakest to strongest, most likely deduced from the results of the interviews.

Not particularly interested, he quickly found his own name near the bottom of the list. The only Sleeper who the Academy judged to be less likely to succeed than him was the blind girl. Turns out, her name was Cassia.

But the commotion was a bit too loud to be just the result of the ranking. Curious, he moved his gaze up. The Sleepers were restless.

"How… how can this be?!"

"I'm not seeing things, right?"

"What kind of a monster is she?!"

Caster was placed in second place. And right above him, the portrait of the silver-haired girl could be clearly seen.

To the right of it, two simple lines of text were displayed:

"Name: Nephis"

"True Name: Changing Star"

Chapter-25: Wilderness Survival

So, the silver-haired girl, Nephis, also received a True Name in her First Nightmare. To get his own, Sunny had to deal with Hero and Mountain King while possessing a completely useless Aspect — an impossible feat that seemed to have pleased the Spell very much.

'I wonder how she had gotten hers.'

Sleepers in the cafeteria were struck dumb by the revelation of this achievement. They were staring at the screen with astonishment, fear and admiration. Listening to their excited whispers, Sunny felt a childish desire to scream "Me too! I have one too!".

But, of course, he kept quiet.

Looking around, he noticed Caster's gaze fixed on the screen. There was a strange, somber expression on the humorous young man's face. But the weird thing about it was that, as far as Sunny could tell, Caster wasn't looking at the line of text containing the True Name.

Instead, he was staring at the line of text that read "Nephis", as though the girl's actual name held more meaning to him than the one given by the Spell.

'Interesting. Do they know each other?'

Why would a lofty Legacy know someone who came to the Academy in a police-issued tracksuit? And speaking of Nephis… where was she?

Sunny glanced around the cafeteria and quickly noticed the silver-haired girl, who was sitting quietly in a corner with a cup of coffee in her hands. She wasn't paying a lot of attention to the commotion, seemingly immersed in her thoughts. Her grey eyes were serious and distant.

"A Sleeper with a True Name? That's impossible!"

"It's technically possible. Smile of Heaven received her True Name in the First Nightmare, I think. But yeah, I'm doubtful…"

"Maybe she lied in the interview?"

"Are you stupid? If it was that easy to deceive the administrators, the crazy pervert from yesterday would have been in the first place instead!"

Sunny's face twitched. Crazy pervert, huh…

"Well, why don't we just ask her?"

Suddenly, there was a deafening silence in the cafeteria. Following the suggestion, Sleepers stopped talking and turned around, staring at Nephis. However, no one seemed to have the courage to approach her first.

Finally sensing something, she raised her eyes and looked at them with surprise.

"Mmm. What?"

Even the blind girl, Cassia, turned in the direction of her voice.

After a couple of moments, Caster suddenly walked over and made a small bow.

"Lady Nephis. I am Caster from the Han Li clan. I see that your trial went well?"

Lady? Why is he addressing her that way? And he had to introduce himself… so, they don't know each other? Interesting.

Nephis seemed to be a little bit perplexed by the question. After thinking for a while, she smiled brightly and shrugged.

"It is what it is."

Caster awkwardly returned the smile.

"I see. I am very glad that you returned unharmed. Uh… not that I doubted your abilities."

Nephis nodded.

"Thank you."

After that, she returned to her coffee, indicating that the conversation was over or simply oblivious to everyone's attention.

Sunny sighed.

'How mysterious.'

There were a lot of thoughts on his mind. However, none of them could distract him from the most important thing… breakfast. A few seconds later, he had forgotten all about the awkward dynamic between Caster and Nephis and was happily shoveling down his food.

***

The Wilderness Survival classroom was spacious, tastefully decorated… and completely empty. Sunny even thought that he was mistaken, but then spotted a gloomy instructor sitting behind a wide wooden desk. Noticing him, the instructor perked up.

"Come in, young man!"

He was a lively old man with messy grey hair, absentminded eyes and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to jump around on their own.

"I'm Awakened Julius. You can call me Teacher Julius. Sit down, sit down! What's your name?

Sunny obediently sat down.

"It's Sunless."

Julius raised his eyebrows.

"Ah! What an ominous name. But that is good, very good. After all, we have to deal with a lot of ominous things!"

Sunny carefully looked around.

"Uh… I'm sorry, Teacher. Did I come too early?"

"No, no… you're right on time."

"Are other students late?"

The instructor grunted with incredible contempt.

"No one else is coming. Those brutes are only interested in swinging their fists and swords around. Very few are smart like you and know the true value of knowledge…"

Oh. So it was that unpopular. Sunny inwardly sighed, hoping that he won't regret the decision to abandon combat training in favor of this course.

"Say, young man… why did you choose Wilderness Survival, of all things?"

There was no point in hiding the true reason. Not that Sunny would have been able to anyway…

"The Awakened that monitored me during the First Nightmare, Master Jet, had advised me to study it above all things."

"A very wise advice! That Master truly knows what's important… wait. Did you say Jet?"

His eyes widened.

"Soul Reaper Jet? That murderous savage?! Hm. Who would have thought that a barbarian like her would know the value of intricate knowledge."

Soul Reaper? Sunny's curiosity was picked.

"Teacher, do you know Master Jet?"

Julius carefully looked behind his back before answering:

"Who doesn't know the Soul Reaper? She might not be the most powerful Awakened out there, but she is certainly one of the most feared. That's because her Aspect Abilities disregard flesh and target soul cores directly. Which means that no amount of armor, damage resistance and physical protection can stop them."

He leaned forward.

"The only good thing is that she's young and not likely to become a Saint anytime soon, or even ever. Yes, luckily, there's a very low probability that she'll ever advance."

Sunny blinked.

"Why?"

Julius looked at him as though trying to comprehend how someone could be so ignorant.

"Because of her problematic personality, of course! Who would want to help a psychopathic killer become a Saint? You need a team of outstanding companions and a lot of support to attempt conquering the Third Nightmare. Soul Reaper Jet isn't… wait!"

Suddenly, Julius frowned and leaned back.

"Why am I gossiping with you? You're too young to know such things! More than that, it's not in my character to badmouth others behind their backs!

'I would beg to differ,' Sunny thought sarcastically, but didn't say anything out loud.

He already got a lot of juicy information out of Teacher Julius.

'Maybe choosing Wilderness Survival was the right choice after all.'

"Let's get back to your curriculum. What other courses are you taking?"

Sunny sighed.

"None. For the next four weeks, I'll be fully concentrated on Wilderness Survival."

Julius stared at him for a whole minute, an expression of utter astonishment written clearly on his face. Then, slowly, an excited gleam appeared in his eyes. Finally, he grinned.

"Wonderful! This is wonderful! You're such an astute young man! Don't you worry. In four whole weeks, I will make you immortal…

***

Sunny's lessons with Teacher Julius started pleasantly and without much tension, but just an hour later, he felt like his head was ready to explode. There was so much new information, and all of it was so strange and counterintuitive for someone who had never left the walled-off, sheltered confines of the city.

From time to time, Julius gaped at Sunny's lack of knowledge and relevant experience. However, he had a good attitude and an endless enthusiasm for teaching. Whenever Sunny stumbled, he would patiently slow down and allow his student to catch up.

The curriculum that Julius planned out was practically insane. There was an endless amount of theoretical knowledge to learn, practical lessons both in virtual reality and

the real world, numerous subjects and weird things to study. There were even several lessons dedicated exclusively to learning the basics of several dead languages of the Dream Realm!

'Why would I need to learn new languages?' Sunny thought with self-pity. 'The Spell automatically translates everything!'

But Julius was uncompromising.

"The Spell is not a translator! Do you think it has the time to express the intricacies of human speech? Let's say you're seeking shelter in a ruin and find an inscription that reads "certain death ahead". There are thirty words for death in the rune language! Just by knowing the runes, you'll be able to deduce what kind of danger there is!"

On the first day, they studied until the sun was about to set. Only then did Julius decide to let Sunny go. Mentally exhausted and lamenting the fact that he had to miss lunch and dinner, Sunny decided to gently remind his teacher about the importance of food for maintaining high levels of concentration tomorrow.

After returning to his room, he fell on a chair and stared blankly into the distance for a while. Then, as though remembering something, Sunny turned to his shadow.

Right. He had a lot to accomplish before supper.

He observed the shadow for a few seconds and then grinned.

"Let's see what you can really do…"

Chapter-26: Changing Star

Sunny was pretty sure that his shadow was capable of much more than just being a silent follower. After all, the Spell had described it as being an invaluable helper. It was now up to him to find out how exactly Shadow Control could be of help.

As in many other matters having to do with Aspects, there was a certain level of instinctual understanding buried deep inside his subconscious. This understanding was either given to him by the Spell or was something innate to every Awakened. Sunny just had to sense the subconscious knowledge and learn how to put it into practice.

Once again, he concentrated on sensing his body and spirit, then commanded the shadow to perform a series of simple motions. With each of them, he was growing more and more familiar with the feeling of controlling the shadow.

Pretty soon, it was as natural to him as breathing and walking. The shadow felt like a part of his body.

Satisfied with this initial result, Sunny carefully gave it a new command. Without pause, the shadow separated itself from the soles of his shoes, walked to the other end of the room and turned around, staring at him in slightly mocking silence.

Sunny was left without a shadow.

'This is not scientific at all,' he thought with an amused smile.

Science never really applied to anything having to do with the Spell, after all.

As the shadow walked away, he felt a very weird split happening in his mind. It was like his perception had separated into two distinct sources. One was his body, the other — his shadow.

With a bit of trying, he managed to focus on the second source. Instantly, his vision blurred.

"Whoa!" Sunny blurted, surprised.

"Whoa!" the shadow heard from the other end of the room.

Sunny blinked. In his mind, there now existed two pictures. One was of his room's door, with an indifferent shadow standing in front of it. The other was of a pale young man sitting on a chair, wide-eyed and bewildered.

'That's me.'

He raised an arm and waved it in the air. Simultaneously, the pale young man raised and waved his.

'I can perceive the world through my shadow?'

He sat for a while, thinking. An ability like that opened up a lot of possibilities. With his [Child of Shadows] attribute allowing him to see and move stealthily in the darkness and [Shadow Control] allowing him to send out a sneaky shadow as a scout, he was pretty much a perfect spy.

A spy was someone who gathered information without exposing themselves to a lot of risk. A role like that suited Sunny's taste very much.

Of course, spies were also able to strike from the shadows with deadly precision. Armed with information, they were masterful ambushers. With the prior knowledge of the opponent's weaknesses, their attacks were surgical and lethal.

But any direct confrontation would mean putting himself in danger, so Sunny wasn't very keen on becoming an assassin. After all, his Aspect still lacked the means of directly enhancing his combat performance.

'Shall we test it?'

He looked at the shadow and gave it a command. With an exaggerated sigh, the shadow bent down and nimbly slid under the door.

Instantly, he could see both the room and the hallway outside. Sunny closed his eyes to focus on the picture projected from the shadow.

Moving stealthily from one shadow to another, it glided down the hallway. With a bit of timing and consideration, his scout was practically invisible. Sunny passed by a couple of Sleepers and listened in on their conversation. Not finding it very interesting, he continued forward.

Finally, the shadow stopped at a corner. To its left were the elevators, to its right — the way to the girls' dormitory.

All sorts of provocative images immediately entered Sunny's head.

'Oh my!' he thought, blushing.

Yes, with this ability, it was also very easy to fall into utter depravity! But no, no. He couldn't do it. Not because of some high moral principles…

It's just that, with his reputation of a pervert, the chances of being asked if he had done something unbecoming were pretty high. So he needed the ability to honestly answer "no".

'So… I probably shouldn't. Right?'

Right?

'Of course you're right! Don't even think about it!'

Back in his room, Sunny sighed with a lot of regret. Then he directed his scout to hide in the shadow of a passing Sleeper and followed him to the elevators.

***

Some time later, Sunny's shadow was hiding in a corner of a large dojo. He was observing his fellow Sleepers who, under the guidance of Instructor Rock, were going through the motions of the introductory combat class.

Today was mainly dedicated to testing their general competency and abilities. After that, the Sleepers were going to be separated into groups based on their level, such as novice, advanced or expert, as well as their weapon of choice. Some would be assigned a personal tutor or paired together.

Currently, Sleepers were taking turns delivering their strongest punches to a wide plate attached to a special measuring machine. After each strike, the machine would display a number corresponding to the Sleeper's physical strength.

In theory, a machine like that was not hard to build. However, considering that many of Sleepers had combat-oriented Aspects that enhanced their might in a variety of ways, it was actually a marvel of engineering and durability.

Their technique and training also affected the final result.

Most people were getting numbers ranging from ten to fourteen. It was considered a good result, something that only the most athletic people could reach. However, a lot of Sleepers, obviously those with enhancing Aspects, were able to achieve a score of fifteen or even sixteen.

'I would probably get ten or eleven,' Sunny thought, feeling a little bored.

Then he suddenly perked up, noticing that it was turn for Nephis, the highest-rated Sleeper of their batch, to strike the plate.

The slender girl approached the machine and, without much preparation, delivered a sudden, crushing blow. Sunny wasn't very well-versed in martial arts, but even he was impressed by the flawless economy and speed of her execution.

'She had a lot of training.'

Nephis was becoming more and more intriguing. What's her actual background?

After a short pause, the machine displayed the result: sixteen. Sunny felt a bit disappointed.

'Not that impressive. I was expecting more.'

She was the proud bearer of a True Name, after all!

After that, only Caster remained. This time, Sunny couldn't even see the flying fist — it was just too fast. The machine trembled and took more time calculating. Finally, two numbers appeared.

Twenty-one.

Everyone gaped at the display, stunned. More than a few admiring looks were thrown at Caster, who simply bowed and took a step back. Instructor Rock smiled.

"Not bad. Now, we will move to sparring and evaluate your general level of training. I need two volunteers to begin."

Nephis was the first to step forward and walk to the center of the ring. A couple of seconds later, a tall and extremely muscular Sleeper followed and faced her.

"The rules are simple. Make your opponent's back touch the floor or throw them out of the ring. Use whatever abilities and techniques you find appropriate."

'Oh, the show is starting!'

Watching Sleepers fight each other was not only entertaining, but could also provide Sunny with knowledge of their powers. Back in the room, he leaned forward and rested his chin on his palms.

'Go Nephis!'

The tall guy attacked without wasting any time. His muscles bulged, threatening to tear the soft fabric of his white dobok. He advanced like an unstoppable mountain, sending a vicious kick flying.

… A second later, he was lying on the floor with a dumbstruck look on his face. Nephis didn't even change her stance.

Instructor Rock gave her a cheerful look and grinned.

"Next."

What followed could only be described as a massacre. One after another, Nephis managed to defeat almost every single Sleeper present in the dojo. She didn't seem to be faster or stronger than them, but each time someone entered the ring to fight her, they would inevitably end up beaten and thrown to the ground.

Sunny watched the process with a growing sense of amusement. However, at some point, even he felt a bit of unease.

Nephis moved with the calm precision of a battle machine. Her technique was clean, graceful and ruthless. No matter what type of attack was thrown at her, she was able to either predict or instantly react to it, then deflect and turn it against the attacker with the minimum amount of effort.

It didn't matter whether her opponent was poor, rich or a Legacy. Everyone would end up dealt with in a matter of seconds.

What's more, through the whole process, the composed expression on her face didn't even change once. It was like Nephis was made out of metal.

'Is… is she even human?' Sunny thought, suddenly apprehensive.

What was he going to do if this Changing Star were to end up as his enemy?

The best course of action would be to run away. Or better yet, try not to antagonize her, to begin with. After all, the sun was also a star, and shadows didn't mix well with sunlight.

Finally, Caster was the last one remaining — once again. However, he didn't seem to be perturbed by the miserable failure of every other Sleeper. With a soft smile on his lips, the young man stepped into the ring.

Caster and Nephis faced each other. Their eyes locked for a few seconds, and then Caster slightly bowed.

"Lady Nephis. Please excuse me in advance."

'What is he going to...'

… A moment later, Sunny opened his eyes in shock.

Chapter-27: Measure of Power

It seemed like Caster suddenly ceased to exist.

However, it was only an illusion. The truth was that he was just moving so fast that the human eye wasn't able to keep up with his movements. If it wasn't for the special properties of Shadow Sight, Sunny wouldn't have been able to perceive anything either.

Even then, he only noticed a hazy blur streaking through the air.

In a fraction of a second, Caster covered the distance between him and Nephis and delivered a devastating blow. However, despite his astonishing speed, she somehow managed to react in time, slightly turning her body to deflect the strike.

But it still wasn't enough. Although Nephis had managed to avoid being hit squarely in her center of gravity, Caster's fist ended up connecting with her shoulder, sending the girl into a spin.

Not wasting any time, Caster disappeared again. His plan was very simple: while Nephis was still under the impression that the enemy was in front of her, he was going to use his unnatural swiftness to circle around and attack from the back.

The young man appeared behind the oblivious girl, ready to finish the fight with one decisive strike. Just as he planned, she seemed to be preparing to attack in the direction he had been seen just a split second ago. Gratified, Caster shifted his weight, putting it all into his fist.

However, at the last moment, Nephis suddenly changed her stance and threw her elbow back with frightening force.

Caster's eye widened. It was all a feint!

And now that he had committed to a strike, there was no simple way to stop. No matter how fast he was, he was still subject to the laws of inertia. The elbow was approaching his face with a profound feeling of inevitability.

And yet, Caster still managed to avoid it, even if it was just by a hair's breadth. His speed advantage was just too big.

He then proceeded to trip and push Nephis, sending her flying to the ground. However, just before she was about to hit the mats, the young man carefully grabbed the collar of her dobok and gently pulled, slowing down the fall and allowing Nephis to land on the floor without any impact.

Lying on her back, the girl blinked a couple of times and looked up at him. The whole altercation lasted no more than two seconds.

Back in his room, Sunny opened his eyes in shock.

'So that's an Ascended Aspect? That's… that's cheating!'

A Sleeper had no business being that fast. The powers bestowed upon them by the Spell were supposed to be in their infancy. But… Caster was a Legacy, after all.

Who knew how many soul shards were fed to him prior to enrolling into the Academy?

Back in the dojo, Instructor Rock grunted and gave Caster a nod. Nephis slowly rose to her feet.

The rest of the Sleepers were gawking at the young man with reverence, whispering among each other in hushed tones. It seemed that his performance left them with a deep impression.

However, Caster himself wasn't very elated. He glanced at Nephis with an unreadable expression.

That was because, unlike the rest of them, he came to a certain realization. The truth of the matter was known only to him, Nephis, Instructor Rock… and Sunny, who was very observant and quickly picked up on such things.

The thing that Sleepers failed to notice was that Nephis did not use her Aspect Ability when facing Caster. In fact, she had not used it at any point during today's testing. No one even knew what her Ability was.

And yet, despite his powerful Aspect, Caster barely managed to clutch a victory against her.

'What a monster,' Sunny thought, full of unease.

The shadow hiding in the corner of the dojo seemed to agree with him wholeheartedly.

***

After that, the introductory combat class was over. Sore from the beating they received, Sleepers headed for the showers. Sunny waited for a bit and then directed his shadow to sneak into the boy's locker room.

He wasn't very interested in watching a bunch of teenagers changing clothes, but there was a slight possibility that Caster would either comment on his duel with Nephis or answer some questions about his incredible Aspect Ability.

Just as he had expected, the young man was surrounded by a group of newly converted fans. They were congratulating him on his victory, full of adoration and excitement. However, Caster himself seemed to be in a bad mood. His expression was somber, and there was a grim heaviness in his eyes.

In fact, his face grew darker with each praise he received.

"Caster, that was incredible!"

"Your Aspect is overpowered, am I right?"

"That Nephis girl stood no chance at all!"

"True Name? Who needs that? She's just a wanna-be!"

Finally, Caster raised his head and pierced the last boy who had spoken with a cold look. That boy, just like him, was one of the few Legacies in their batch of Sleepers. He frowned, surprised by Caster's rection.

"What is it?"

Caster gritted his teeth.

"I might have expected such behavior from them, but you should know better."

The other Legacy raised an eyebrow.

"Why? Is there something special about that peasant girl?"

Caster's eyes widened.

"Peasant… peasant girl? Do you really not know who she is?"

'No!' Sunny thought impatiently. 'So just get to it and say it out loud!'

Luckily, the arrogant Sleeper had the same sentiment.

Caster opened his mouth several times, as though not sure what to say. Finally, he shook his head and answered:

"She is Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan."

As soon as he said that, the arrogant Legacy became deathly pale. Not paying him any attention, Caster continued.

"I trust that I don't need to tell you about her grandfather. Her parents were Smile of Heaven and Broken Sword."

In his room, Sunny almost fell from the chair.

Even he knew who Immortal Flame and Broken Sword were. The former was the first human to conquer the Second Nightmare and become a Master. The latter — the first one to conquer the Third Nightmare and become a Saint.

They, as well as their companions, were among the most famous heroes of the human race, someone who had managed to change history with their own two hands. If what Caster said was true, then Nephis wasn't just an aristocrat… she was royalty!

No wonder he addressed her as "lady". Why didn't he just call her "princess" instead?

But that didn't make any sense!

Echoing his thoughts, the pale-faced Sleeper asked in trembling voice:

"Then why… why is she so…"

Caster sighed.

"Because they're all dead. The Immortal Flame clan is long gone."

For a few moments, the locker room was completely silent. Caster looked down.

"She's the only one left."

***

Late at night, when everyone was already asleep, Sunny furtively entered the dojo. Looking around, he made sure that no one was there and then curiously approached the ring where Nephis and others had been tested earlier. He stopped at the center of the ring and stood there for a while, remembering how she had dealt with dozens of Sleepers of their batch before being defeated by Caster.

"Monsters… both of them are monsters!" he mumbled, bitter and disheartened.

Shaking his head, Sunny left the ring and then he looked at his shadow.

"Do you agree?"

The shadow hesitated for a few seconds, then stuck out its chest and crossed its arms, trying to appear cocky, disdainful and unperturbed. However, its act wasn't very convincing.

"Yeah, you're right. Exactly! What's the big deal anyway?"

Both Immortal Flame and Broken Sword, Nephis's father and grandfather, were as monstrous in terms of power as one can get. But they still failed to protect their family from being eviscerated. So, power wasn't that important in the end.

Even royalty was not safe from the cruelty of the world.

Sunny sighed and proceeded to the measuring machine. Making a fist, he swung it and delivered his best punch. The machine hummed for a few seconds and then displayed a single number.

Nine.

"Oh, come on! I deserve a ten, at least!"

Feeling very indignant, he struck the plate again, almost hurting his fingers. However, the result was the same.

"Damn it!"

Sunny paced for a bit, trying to control his anger. It seems he was destined to be a weakling. After all, the force of the strike depended on mass and acceleration. Acceleration could be improved with technique and exercise, but mass was something he had little control of.

He was already done growing, and his height was not going to drastically increase in the future. No matter how hard Sunny trained, he was always going to be a lightweight.

'How is this fair?'

Suddenly filled with resentment, he punched the plate again, putting all of his frustration into this one strike.

At that moment, a strange instinct suddenly awakened in Sunny's mind.

Following the command of this instinct, his shadow flowed up and wrapped itself around his hand, sticking to it like a black glove. In the next moment, the punch connected.

The machine trembled from the force of the strike. Sunny's yelped in pain and took a step back, cradling his bruised fist. After a while, the result was displayed. However, it wasn't a nine anymore.

It wasn't even a ten.

It was eighteen.

He looked at the displayed number for a long time, expressionless.

Then, a wide grin slowly appeared on Sunny's face.

"I see. So that why. Of course!"

He clenched his fist again, looking down at the black, shadowy glove.

Ah, what an invaluable helper indeed.

"Now we're talking!"

Chapter-28: Training Montage

Days flew by.

Sunny only had four weeks to prepare himself for the journey into the Dream Realm, so there wasn't even a minute to spare. He was relentless, pushing his body and mind to the limits in an attempt to absorb as much knowledge and skills as possible in that short amount of time.

In the day, he studied with Teacher Julius, slowly learning how to survive and take care of himself in the absence of civilization. Their lessons ranged from comparatively simple, like various ways to produce fire, to much more obscure and esoteric, like celestial navigation.

What was so hard about celestial navigation?

Well, as it turned out, the Dream Realm was not consistent in terms of star geography. Different regions had different stars and constellations, as well as a different number of moons. While the sun seemed to be the same, its behavior was highly unpredictable.

Still, with sufficient knowledge, one could find ways to study the skies and subsequently navigate themselves.

Most of these lessons were, supposedly, already included in the various school curriculums and known to the majority of Sleepers. However, learning something from a textbook and learning the same thing from an actual Awakened were two completely different matters.

Teacher Julius had a habit of going much more in-depth when explaining his subject. Thanks to this time-consuming habit of his, Sunny not only learned about the "what", but also often gained glimpses into the "why". This nascent understanding of the underlying principles of the Dream Realm environments gave him the ability to face any situation with at least some measure of readiness.

Even the lessons in dead languages, which Sunny had initially judged to be useless, turned out to be much more interesting than he could ever imagine. This was, in large

part, because it concerned the Spell itself — after all, the Spell communicated with humans in one of those dead languages.

By knowing the language, he was able to understand its various remarks and descriptions better. The simplest example of this was Nephis and her True Name, "Changing Star". While technically correct, this translation failed to properly convey the exact meaning.

By understanding the grammatical structure of the rune language, it was easy to extrapolate and see that the more correct translation would have been "Star of Change". More than that, there were different runes for "change", each with its own connotation. Depending on what exact rune was used to relay the meaning of the name, it could also mean "Ruinous Star" or "Star of Misfortune".

A small change in wording and connotation could mean a world of difference in real life.

Sunny, who had never seriously studied before, found the process of acquiring vast amounts of theoretical knowledge strange, numbing and exhausting.

However, in a sense, it was also exhilarating. After all, knowledge was something that only the privileged had access to. It was also this authority over knowledge that kept them in the position of power, creating a vicious circle of inequality.

The poor had no opportunity to study, and without the advantage of good education, they had no way to stop being poor.

The weirdest part about all of this was that Sunny was now one of those privileged people. More than that, he was at the pinnacle of social hierarchy. Not only had he gained access to an unlimited amount of knowledge, but even his basic needs like food and shelter were also taken care of by the government, allowing him to fully focus on the single goal of developing himself as an Awakened.

This sudden transformation would have sent him into a whirlpool of philosophical reflection if he had any time to spare.

But he didn't, because Teacher Julius also insisted on holding practical lessons every other day. Even if some of them had to be done in virtual reality simulations, he insisted on using the full immersion stations with enhanced physical feedback. As a result, Sunny was bone-tired and utterly exhausted.

The good thing was that with such amount of exercise, coupled with his newly reforged body, Sunny had never been in better shape. Even without combat training, he could feel his strength, stamina and agility improving by leaps and bounds.

Basically, the peculiar rebirth he had experienced after completing the First Nightmare had enhanced the innate potential of his body, bringing it to the peak of the human condition. However, it was up to him to realize that potential with sweat, effort and a lot of hard work. Practical application of wilderness survival techniques provided him with the opportunity to do so.

And as though this wasn't enough, Sunny secretly collected information about other Sleepers and practiced shadow control every night.

His shadow was independent enough to be sent on scouting missions without his direct control. It would sneak here and there, listening in on the conversations and observing different classes where Sleepers had to demonstrate their Aspect Abilities.

Then, after Sunny had finished his supper and returned to his room, it would come back and share everything it had heard and seen during the day.

The only problem with this arrangement was that the shadow, despite its outward snarkiness, turned out to be rather naive. It didn't quite understand how the human world worked, and as such, often failed to distinguish between useful information and meaningless chatter.

So, most of the time, Sunny would receive nothing of value or juicy gossip instead of important secrets.

This is how he learned that in the Sleeper Center, romance was in the air. After all, there were a hundred beautiful young people locked underground in close proximity to each other, with the added spice of a deathly threat hanging above their heads. Many felt that life was short and it was their time to seize the day. Passion bloomed in the shadow of approaching danger.

Sunny was excluded from this whole side of the thing, of course. Firstly, he had already positioned himself to be perceived as an unlikable lunatic. Secondly, he simply had no time for anything except for his lessons and training. And lastly, he was wary of getting too close to anybody, afraid that a situation would arise where he would have no choice but to divulge his True Name.

Apart from gathering information and slowly learning about the scope and details of various Aspect Abilities, and, to a lesser extent, Flaws, he was also experimenting with

Shadow Control.

The results were very promising. He quickly found out that his shadow was able to enhance various objects and not only his body. If it wrapped itself around a weapon, the weapon struck harder and deliver more damage. If it was applied to an armor, the armor would become sturdier and harder to break.

The enhancement was rather substantial, too. It was roughly twice as much as the initial value.

All in all, this Ability, if used correctly, could make him a powerhouse among the Sleepers. Many combat Aspects could deliver more speed or damage, many could provide more defense and protection, but none were as well-rounded and versatile as Shadow Slave.

With the added utility of Shadow Sight, Shadow Step and Shadow Scout, it was truly incredible.

Just like that, day after day passed, slowly turning into weeks.

Before Sunny even knew it, the winter solstice was already here.

Chapter-29: The Last Day on Earth

On the day of the winter solstice, Sunny woke up feeling tired and drowsy. No matter how much he tried to shake off this listlessness, it wouldn't go away. In the end, he just stayed in the bed for a while, wrapping himself in a blanket.

He was already familiar with this feeling of neverending, ensnaring sleepiness. It was the same in the days before his First Nightmare. It was also quite similar to what he had experienced while slowly dying of hypothermia on the slopes of the Black Mountain.

Remembering the cold embrace of approaching death, Sunny couldn't help but shiver.

This was his last day on Earth… at least for a while. By nightfall, the Spell was going to take him away once again, this time to challenge the vast expanse of the Dream Realm. What was he going to face in that ruined magical world? Would luck be on his side this time, or would there be another disaster?

'Ugh.'

There was no point in guessing. He had already done everything in his power to prepare for the inevitable. He studied hard, trained hard, and kept his secret safe. His Aspect was better than most, and his will to survive was long tempered by the harsh reality of the outskirts and the even harsher ordeal of the First Nightmare.

All in all, he was ready.

With a sigh, Sunny got out of bed and went along with his morning routine. If this was going to be his last hot shower in a long while, he was going to really enjoy it. If it was going to be his last scrumptious breakfast for the time being…

Actually, he had no appetite.

The cafeteria was full of Sleepers, but no one was talking. Everybody was in low spirits and seemed to be uncharacteristically introspective. There was no usual laughter or boisterous conversations — only the Legacies remained calm and collected. However, even they kept to themselves.

Sunny thought about the last time he was preparing to enter the Spell and, with a bit of trepidation, approached the coffee machine. During his stay in the Academy, he had long discovered that a lot of people were in a habit of adding sugar and milk to their coffee. So, on this auspicious day, he decided to give it another try.

After all, it was nice to have a tradition.

A few minutes later, he had taken his usual seat near Cassia, the blind girl. Despite their compulsory closeness, they had not talked to each other even once, just like two strangers forced to share the same space by circumstances beyond their control. Sunny did not see a reason for anything to change today.

However, as soon as he took the first sip of coffee, Cassia suddenly turned her head and stared at him with her beautiful, blind blue eyes.

Unnerved, Sunny looked around, checking if someone else had attracted her attention, and, after making sure that there wasn't anyone standing behind him, asked:

"W—what?"

Cassia was silent, as though hesitating if she should reply, and then suddenly said:

"Happy Birthday."

'What?'

Sunny frowned, trying to comprehend the meaning behind her words. Then, a flash of surprise appeared on his face.

'Oh, right. It's my birthday today.'

He had completely forgotten about it. He was turning seventeen today.

'Wait… how did she know about this?'

Sunny gave the blind girl a strange look, opened his mouth, and then decided to let the issue go. She was just too creepy.

"Uh… thanks."

With a nod, Cassia turned away and seemingly lost interest in having a conversation once again.

Which was for the better.

Sunny returned to his coffee, finding it not too bad this time. Of course, sugar and cream were doing most of the work. However, he did feel a little bit more awake after drinking it.

'Seventeen, huh?'

Sunny was never sure that he would make it to this age alive. And yet, despite everything, he did. Life was sure unpredictable sometimes.

If anyone would have told him a year ago that he was going to celebrate his seventeenth birthday by drinking real coffee with real milk and sugar, he would have laughed in their face. But now it was a reality.

Unwillingly, Sunny remembered all the people who used to celebrate his birthdays with him, a long time ago. Before his mood turned sour, he decisively dispelled these thoughts and forced himself to smile.

'This is not bad. Let's do it again next year, when I'm already an Awakened.'

Cheering himself up like that, he finished his coffee and left the cafeteria.

There were no classes today, but he still visited the Wilderness Survival classroom and said his goodbyes to Teacher Julius. The old man got pretty emotional when sending him off. He gave Sunny "one last tip" a dozen or so times in a row and even promised to apply for a research assistant position to be opened after the young man had become a full Awakened.

Sunny left thanking him for his time and patience.

After that, there wasn't much to do.

When the sun was close to setting, Instructor Rock gathered them in the foyer of the Sleeper Center and led them outside.

In the snowy parks that surrounded the white building, other Awakened were leading their own batches of Sleepers to the same destination. It was the Academy's medical center.

The center looked more like a shrine than a hospital. Its interior contained both highly advanced technology as well as some of the best Healers among the Awakened.

For the duration of their first journey into the Dream Realm, the bodies of Sleepers would be kept safe in specially designed pods and sustained by the magical powers of those Healers if anything unfortunate were to happen on the other side of the Spell.

Of course, whether or not they would wake up in the end wholly depended on the Sleepers themselves.

To Sunny's surprise, after entering the medical center, Instructor Rock did not take them directly to the wing containing Sleeper pods. Instead, he led them to a comparatively deserted floor and then opened the doors to a spacious gallery that was brightly illuminated by the beautiful crimson rays of the setting sun.

There, they saw rows and rows of wheelchairs. In each wheelchair, there was a person with a blank, strangely peaceful expression on their face. All these people were completely silent, motionless, and still. They did not show any reaction to the appearance of guests.

They all seemed to be… empty.

In the eerie silence, Sunny felt his hair standing up and a creeping terror seeping deep into his heart.

Instructor Rock looked at the empty people with solemn eyes.

"There is a reason I brought you all here. Look well and remember. Some of you may know who these people are… for those of you who don't, they are called Hollow."

He gritted his teeth.

"Each one of them was once either a Sleeper or an Awakened. Some of them were weak, some of them were strong. Some were even incredibly powerful. All of them have perished in the Dream Realm."

'Their… their souls are gone,' Sunny realized, horrified.

"If you're lucky, once your spirit is destroyed, your body dies with it. But if not, you'll become just like them. Hollow."

Instructor Rock glanced in the direction where Caster and Nephis stood, and then added:

"So don't die out there."

***

Half an hour later, Sleepers had been led to their personal rooms and were preparing to enter the pods.

In one of the rooms, the blind girl, Cassia, was helplessly trying to orient herself in the unfamiliar space, touching the walls and strange pieces of machinery with her hands. Tears were streaming down her beautiful, doll-like face.

In the other room, proud Legacy Caster was staring listlessly at the floor. His lips were moving, repeating one strange phrase over and over again. He was trembling.

Somewhere else, Changing Star Nephis, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, was looking down at her hands. Underneath her skin, soft white radiance was slowly growing brighter and brighter. Her face was contorted in a grimace of harrowing agony.

And finally, there was a room where Shadow Slave Sunless, Lost from Light, turned away from the sleeping pod and glanced down at his shadow.

"Well? Are you ready?"

The shadow shrugged and didn't answer.

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah, me too."

With that, he stepped forward and climbed into the pod.

***

In the vast echoing darkness, he heard:

[Welcome to the Dream Realm, Sunless!]

Chapter-30: Starless Void

Sunny was expecting to first look at the place where his arrival to the Dream Realm was going to take place from above, just like it had happened at the beginning of the First Nightmare. Back then, time had magically moved in reverse, giving him an opportunity to see hints of what he was going to face.

Instead, immediately after hearing the greetings of the Spell, Sunny found himself blind and drowning. As he instinctively tried to open his mouth to scream, salty water rushed inside, making him choke and twitch.

More than that, he couldn't see anything. No, it's not that he couldn't see — it's just there was no source of light around. Usually, darkness wasn't a problem for Sunny, but, for some reason, his sight wasn't working anymore. Maybe the seawater he was submerged in was blocking it.

If it wasn't for the special space perception that the affinity to shadows gave him, he would have been completely disoriented. With its help, though, he barely managed to understand which side was down, and which side was up.

Luckily, Teacher Julius's lessons had included swimming. Swearing to thank both the old man and Master Jet once he came back, Sunny forced himself to stay calm and began to swim upward.

In a few long and tense seconds, his head broke through the surface of the water. Sunny was finally able to draw in a deep, hoarse breath.

'Breathe, breathe. You're still alive!'

After sucking in enough air to soothe his burning lungs and compose himself to a certain degree, Sunny carefully spun in the water, trying to take in his surroundings.

What met him was an endless, jet-black expanse of undulating waves. Above them was an empty black sky. There was no moon, no stars, just a dark vastness of repressive nothingness. Sunny blinked a few times, cold dread taking hold of his heart.

'This is… a sea? An ocean? Was I dropped in the middle of an ocean?'

No, it couldn't be. There had to be solid ground somewhere nearby!

As he was gripped by a momentary panic, a remote sound suddenly drew his attention. Sunny turned around and saw a triangular dorsal fin moving in his direction. Luckily, it was still hundreds and hundreds of meters away.

'Wait… if it's so far away… then how come I can see it so clearly?'

Despite being submerged in water, Sunny still felt like there was suddenly cold sweat all other his body. By his estimation, that dorsal fin was at least five meters tall. It was rapidly approaching, growing visibly larger with each second.

'Damn you, Spell!'

With eyes full of horror, Sunny spun again, desperately trying to find something — anything! — to save him. And there, a short distance away, he finally noticed a black mass protruding slightly above the water.

Not wasting even a second on thinking, he started to swing his arms and legs, swimming in the direction of the black mass with a considerable speed. However, no matter how fast he swam, the giant shadow of the unknown creature was closing the distance between them much faster.

A small part of Sunny's mind managed to preserve its rationality even when faced with this boundless, primal fear. Not allowing himself to slip entirely into panic, Sunny tried to think, and then silently commanded his own shadow to wrap itself around his body. Instantly, his speed increased twofold.

Just seconds before the unknown colossus got to him, Sunny reached the black mass, stretched out his hands, and pulled himself out of the water. He rolled away from the edge, scratching his skin on the uneven rocks, and jumped in fright when the whole surface underneath him shuddered, as though something massive had collided with it.

As Sunny backed out, terrifying jaws appeared from the water, with rows and rows of giant teeth, each one as long as he was tall. He opened his eyes wide, understanding that the rock he had climbed on was not tall enough to save him from the monster.

'Why is it even trying to eat me?! I'm too small to be considered a filling snack for something this enormous!'

… However, before the monster had a chance to attack, a colossal tentacle suddenly broke through the water and rose into the air like some strange, black tower. Before too long, it fell down, entangling the owner of the giant maw and pulling it back under the water.

Sunny lost the feeling in his legs and plopped on the ground, his mouth opened. His whole body was shaking.

A few seconds later, the dark sea was calm again, as though nothing had happened. The indifferent waves continued to move silently under the lightless sky.

'So, it wasn't trying to eat me,' he realized, frozen.

'It was trying to run away.'

***

A few minutes later, Sunny was pretty sure that nothing was going to devour him, at least not immediately. With that certainty, he was finally in a state of mind to stop trembling and explore his surroundings a little.

The black mass he climbed onto turned out to be a single stone platform of around twelve meters in diameter. Its surface was mostly flat, covered with grooves, and somewhat dry. Due to the regular shape of its edges, it seemed more like something man-made than a natural formation.

But then again, here in the Dream Realm, it was hard to be sure that something "man-made" was actually made by humans, as opposed to…

Better not to think about it.

The platform wasn't connected to anything, existing as a tiny island in the sea of darkness. There wasn't anything else above the water for as far as Sunny was able to see. After discovering that fact, he also realized something else.

It was that he was wet, cold, and completely naked.

'Huh.'

In his defense, the clothing situation was the last thing one would think about when trying to save themselves from abyssal monsters. Also, it's not like someone was here to witness his stark paleness and private bits.

Still, it was sort of cold.

Sunny summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud and watched as dark-grey garments covered his body. It even came with a pair of high, soft-soled leather boots. Clad in grey fabric and lusterless leather, he suddenly felt much safer.

Not to mention, warm.

After that, Sunny sat down in the middle of the platform, as far away from water as he could, and tried to remember the unique characteristic of every explored region of the Dream Realm he could think of.

Unfortunately, none of them matched this starless, dark void.

'Of course not,' he thought with a bit of resentment. 'Even if some unlucky humans had ever come here, I doubt that they were able to return to the real world alive.'

Not with those things hiding underwater.

Not yet desperate enough to leave the platform and try to swim away in search of land, Sunny decided to wait and see. Maybe something was going to change as time went by.

With a soft sigh, he habitually looked for his shadow. However, due to the total darkness that surrounded him, it couldn't really be seen. He just barely felt its presence.

"This must be a paradise for you, right? All this gloom and not a star in sight!"

The shadow, of course, did not answer.

"Anyway... good job earlier."

With a nod, Sunny lay down, using his hands as a pillow. Not thinking about much, he stared into the black sky and waited. The sound of the undulating waves was, actually, quite relaxing.

After a while, he closed his eyes and listened. Minutes merged together, growing into hours.

… Suddenly, Sunny caught a slight change in the sound of the sea. It was as though something was shifting. He opened his eyes and noticed that one corner of the sky was slowly turning grey. Soon, a glimpse of a pale sun could be seen rising above the horizon.

A new day had come to the starless void.

And with it, the dark sea suddenly surged.

Chapter-31: Low Tide

The black, opaque water suddenly surged and seethed, as though a living creature desperately trying to avoid the pale light of the coming dawn. Sunny slowly rose and, after some thought, carefully approached the edge of the stone platform.

Looking down, he blinked and then kneeled to make sure that what he saw wasn't an illusion.

The sea seemed to be receding.

Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, the water level was dropping. The circular stone formation he had been taking shelter on used to barely protrude out of the waves, but now there were meters and meters of wet rock between him and the restless surface of the sea.

As the sun climbed up, the monstrous ebb tide continued. Soon, Sunny found himself standing on the edge of a tall cliff, with a hundred-meter drop separating him from the churning waters. Beneath him, the rock formation broadened and changed shape. However, from his vantage point, it was hard to determine what that shape was, exactly.

At that time, the dark surface of the water began to be punctured here and there by sharp crimson blades. As it dropped even further, it was as though a crimson forest was slowly rising from the black depths. The "trees" were made of something resembling coral, growing chaotically into each other and stretching toward the sky.

They were colossal in size, with irregular protrusions entwining and merging together, looking monumental and eerie in the black and red reality of the sunlit void. The labyrinth formed by this strange reef stretched as far as Sunny could see, broken here and there by protruding cliffs, sudden chasms, and distant natural features.

Half an hour later, utterly shocked, Sunny stared down and realized that the sea was completely gone. If not for the black seaweed left hanging on wet rocks and scarlet pillars of coral, he would even doubt if it was ever there.

His small circular island had turned into the peak of a strange, towering, irregularly shaped cliff. Looking down, he felt his head spinning.

By then, the night had already fully retreated, letting morning finally take its place.

'I'm not seeing things, am I?' Sunny thought, pinching himself.

What the Spell was that?

***

Despite the sudden disappearance of the dark sea and its hidden monsters, Sunny was in no rush to climb down from his circular stone platform. Firstly, he felt that if the sea was able to disappear, it was surely able to come back, perhaps at any moment.

Secondly, he did not know what dangers the coral labyrinth was hiding. Perhaps there was something even scarier than the owner of the giant tentacle down there.

But that did not mean that he wasn't going to explore.

Coming back to his spot in the middle of the platform, Sunny sat down and commanded his shadow to separate itself from his body. Then, taking control of it, he approached the edge of the platform and nimbly slid down.

Habitually moving from one shadow to another, he began the descent. At this moment, Sunny was glad that shadows had no weight and were not affected by gravity.

While the shadow was busy climbing down, Sunny yawned.

"Say, don't you think that you need a name?"

Although his shadow was already too far away to hear him, they still could communicate through their shared connection. Of course, the fact that it could did not mean that it would. The shadow was sort of taciturn, mostly because it didn't have vocal cords and was unable to speak.

Plus, its temper wasn't that great.

"How about… Shameless? No? What about... Shady? Also no? Hm, what about something simpler, like… What?

Well, do you have suggestions then? Alright, alright! We'll shelve this conversation for later."

By the time he was done with this short monologue, the shadow had already reached the bottom of the cliff. The range of [Shadow Control] was not limitless, but it was just barely enough to explore their nearest surroundings.

Entering the labyrinth, Sunny found it to be extremely disorienting and convoluted. The paths between coral pillars were sometimes broad, sometimes narrow. They twisted and turned without any logic, often leading to dead ends or even back to where he started. More than that, some paths entered inside the "coral" mounds, turning into dark tunnels.

The labyrinth was vast and multi-layered, making Sunny's head hurt after multiple fruitless attempts to memorize the layout of the nearest pathways. In the end, he sent the shadow up, forcing it to climb on top of the crimson forest and start jumping from one sharp coral blade to another — knowing full well that he himself would not be able to do the same.

Soon, he circled the strange cliff and froze, scared by the sight of what was happening in its shadow.

There, the corpse of the giant shark-like creature that had briefly pursued him the previous night was laying on the ground, the pillars of coral around it shattered and broken.

More precisely, half of it was there, with grotesque innards spilling out of the terrible wound and stretching far away into the distance. The other half was gone, as though it had never existed.

Around the corpse, hundreds of smaller monsters were scurrying, tearing away and devouring its flesh bit by bit. Each of them was about two and a half meters tall, looking like a weird mix of a demonic crab, a centaur, and a nightmare.

They had four pairs of long, segmented legs that ended in scythe-like protrusions. At the front, a human-like torso was protruding from the carapace, also clad in thick chitinous armor. The head, if it was even the appropriate word, was situated directly on top of the torso, with no neck in between. It had two narrow eye slits and a vicious-looking mouth with several slimy mandibles.

Instead of hands, the monsters had two enormous pincers.

Currently, they were all using those pincers to tear off chunks of meat off the desiccated corpse and stuff them into their mouths. From time to time, a fight for an especially juicy

piece of meat would break out, ending up in a few monsters being torn apart and quickly devoured by the victors.

Sunny swallowed.

Both because the sight of heavily armored, powerful monsters made him nervous and because looking at them feasting, he suddenly felt very hungry.

'Each of them seems like trouble. And there are hundreds of them.'

His luck, like always, was awful.

'At least I don't have to wonder why the labyrinth feels so empty. All the inhabitants are having a party!'

Feeling a little bit apprehensive about turning his shadow's back to the monsters, Sunny commanded it to look back and study the cliff he was taking shelter atop of. Something about it was making him feel uneasy.

The shadow turned around and looked up, taking in the sight of the strangely shaped cliff. It took Sunny a few minutes to shift his perspective and recognize it for what it was.

'That's… a finger. That's a hand. That is… a sword?'

He blinked.

'It's a statue.'

Indeed, the cliff was man-made. It was an ancient, colossal statue at least two hundred meters tall. The scale of it was so massive that it boggled the mind. From what Sunny could see, it depicted a knight clad in an elaborate plate armor, with seven shining stars carved into his breastplate. In his hands, he was holding a gargantuan sword, pointing it to the ground.

However, the most striking thing about it was that the giant stone knight was missing his head. In fact, the roughly circular platform Sunny was standing on turned out to be the top of his neck. And by the looks of it, the head wasn't missing by design — it was as though something, or someone, had violently tore it off at some point in the distant past.

Sunny walked around the platform, looking down from all sides, but didn't notice the head lying anywhere near.

'What on Earth is this place?'

Without any hints to find the answer, he led his shadow back to the giant's neck and settled at the western edge of it, studying the feasting monsters.

He didn't move until the sun was about to set.

Just as Sunny expected, as soon as the sun touched the horizon, a deafening rumble could be heard coming from somewhere below. The monsters instantly stopped their feast and scurried away, some hiding inside the coral pillars, some simply burying themselves in the soft soil.

A few minutes later, the first streams of black water appeared in the labyrinth. Their volume quickly grew, and soon an apocalyptic flood devoured everything around. The sea was returning with the approach of the night.

Sunny stared at this unimaginable process, thoughts churning in his head.

In an hour, the circular platform was the only thing above the dark waters once again.

Chapter-32: Making a Choice

With an empty stomach and a head full of thoughts, Sunny returned to the center of the platform and sat down. After a while, he beckoned to his shadow and said:

"Wake me up if anything happens."

Then, he closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep. His consciousness quickly slid into the sweet embrace of darkness, giving Sunny some well-needed rest.

In the middle of the night, however, a sudden impulse stirred him awake. Sunny jumped to his feet, his groggy mind full of tense apprehension. He was afraid that the owner of the giant tentacle had come back to finish the job.

Or maybe some other horror from the depths had sensed him and decided to snack on human meat.

However, the sea was quiet and calm. He didn't hear any abnormalities around the knight's statue.

"What is it?" Sunny whispered, addressing the shadow.

The shadow silently pointed him in a particular direction.

Turning his head, Sunny squinted. He quickly understood why it was a good idea to wake up. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to see…

Out there in the distance, a few kilometers away, a small orange light was shimmering in the darkness. Its reflections were rising and falling with the movement of waves.

It was too far away to make out any details, so Sunny just stared at it for a while. Pretty soon, the light disappeared.

"Other Sleepers? Natural phenomenon? Or some monster laying a trap?"

Memories of nightmarish deepwater creatures immediately came to his mind.

Shaking his head, Sunny lay back down and attempted to return to his slumber. However, this time sleep was escaping him. Pangs of hunger were still not unbearable, but slowly becoming more and more intense. The thirst, however, was worse.

In the end, he remained awake up until the sun rose again, sending the dark sea in retreat.

***

As soon as the morning came, the pincer monsters crawled back from their hiding spots and rushed to the giant carcass to continue their feast.

Sunny watched them for some time and then walked to the opposite side of the platform to take a look in the direction where he had seen the mysterious light the previous night.

At a considerable distance from the headless statue, five or six kilometers away, the ground rose naturally and formed something akin to a hill. On top of that hill, an especially massive coral pillar rose to the sky.

From the looks of it, its upper branches were just high enough to stay above water in the night.

Various ideas stormed into Sunny's head, but at the end of it, only two questions were really important.

First of all — would he be able to find the way through the labyrinth and cover that distance during the day? And more importantly, should he even attempt to do it? After all, there was no indication that the source of the mysterious light was something beneficial, as opposed to dreadful and deadly.

Not having enough information to make a choice, Sunny settled back to study the monsters. He did, however, send the shadow to investigate as far into the labyrinth as the range of Shadow Control allowed, hoping to chart at least the beginning of the path that could potentially lead him to that hill.

Logically speaking, he was as safe atop the headless statue as he probably could be in this strange place. The only problem was, he was going to die soon because of thirst or hunger.

Both problems were solvable if he were to venture down. He could desalinate the seawater in a number of ways taught to him by Teacher Julius, with materials that were present pretty much everywhere in the Dream Realm. He could also prepare traps and

hunt a pincer monster to eat. With their massive size, just one of them would be enough to feed him for weeks.

He could easily see such a routine: hunting by day, returning to the statue at the approach of the night. It was probably his safest choice.

However, this way of doing things lacked one vital element: the potential for improvement. It was well suited for keeping Sunny alive, but had no way of giving him hope. If he was destined to spend the rest of his life in the small area surrounding the headless statue, devouring monsters and trembling at night in fear of being devoured by something bigger in turn…

Well, he would rather just jump down and end it right now.

That pretty much meant that the only choice left for him was to try and reach the source of the orange light. And if Sunny was really trying to attempt it, he had to do it before the pincer monsters were done consuming the giant carcass.

That way, at least, the surrounding segment of the labyrinth was going to be free of them.

Firm in his choice, Sunny decided to leave the headless statue the next morning. He would spend the rest of today exploring paths through the labyrinth and preparing himself mentally.

With that, he closed his eyes and concentrated his perception on the moving shadow.

***

In the night, a sudden storm descended upon the dark sea. Sunny was stirred awake by the shadow in time to prepare himself for the crushing winds and the pelting rain.

Usually, rain always put him in a bad mood. But this time he was too thirsty to think about anything except for freshwater. Staying low so as to not be blown over the edge of the platform, Sunny cupped his hands and waited until they became filled with rainwater. Then he raised them to his mouth and greedily drank.

Strikes of lightning illuminated everything above the churning sea. If anyone were to see Sunny now, they would have noticed a wide grin on his face.

The storm continued to rampage for several hours. Sunny crouched in the middle of the platform, enduring its rage. More than once, a tall wave would crash into the headless

knight's neck, threatening to wash him away. But Sunny held tight to the deep grooves in the stone surface of the platform, sticking to it like glue.

By morning, when the storm finally dissipated, all of his muscles were sore.

But there was no time to waste.

As soon as the monsters came back to the carcass, with a few stragglers quickly following behind, he slid over the edge of the platform and began to nimbly climb down.

Sunny had to thank Wilderness Survival classes once again, since he had been taught the basics of rock climbing as well. Teacher Julius was adamant about giving his student a crash course in all possible forms of traversal. Additionally, Sunny had already scouted the optimal way down and memorized the best holds and indentions to grab onto with the help of his shadow.

Soon, his feet finally touched the ground.

Despite the fact that leaving the safety of the headless statue was going to put him in considerable danger, Sunny instantly felt his mood improving. Remaining passive for the last couple of days did not suit his character well. Now, even if his plan were to end in failure, at least he was going to go down doing something that he had decided to do.

Trying and failing was better than not trying at all.

The black mud was deep enough to slow him down, but not to the extent he had been afraid of. With some practice, Sunny was soon able to walk at an acceptable speed. What's more, as long as he stuck to the shadows, his steps were light and silent, producing no squelching noises from the mud.

He headed for one of the paths that were supposed to lead him to the distant hill and entered the cool shade of the crimson labyrinth.

Immediately, a strange feeling enveloped his mind. It was as though the world beyond the labyrinth did not exist anymore, and all that was left were its twisting, dark paths.

'This thing almost seems endless.'

Shaking his head, Sunny sent the shadow to scout ahead, hoping to be notified of any latent danger in advance, and began to move forward. His life now depended on whether or not he would reach the distant hill before the sun began to set.

He didn't even want to think about what would happen if he were still inside the labyrinth once the dark sea came back in an unstoppable flood.

The shadow moved ahead of him, not meeting any hurdles. Sometimes it would climb high to scout the direction of different paths, allowing Sunny to choose the optimal route most of the time. However, he still had to backtrack a considerable distance once or twice, ending up either in a dead-end or on a path leading in the wrong direction.

Despite that, everything seemed to be going smoothly.

Sunny even had time to carefully study the interior of the labyrinth, noticing more details of its composition, as well as a frightening amount of unrecognizable bones hiding in the mud beneath his feet.

Because of how well things were going, he lowered his guard a little. His arrogance was also to blame — with his extensive preparations and skillful control of the Shadow Scout, Sunny subconsciously patted himself on the shoulder and assumed that everything was going to be fine.

That's why, when the mud directly in front of him started to move, he was a fraction of a second late to react.

In the next moment, a massive pincer shot out of the ground and tore through the air, threatening to cut his body in half with one crushing strike.

Chapter-33: Carapace Scavenger

'Crap!'

This was the only thought in Sunny's head as he awkwardly fell backward, allowing the pincer to close right in front of his face with a loud "clack". The jagged, chitinous blades were so close that he could clearly see bits of mud sticking to their surface.

Sunny landed on his back, narrowly avoiding the unexpected strike. The good thing was that he managed to avoid being injured or even killed. The bad thing was that he was sprawled on the ground, unable to quickly create distance between him and the attacker. The massive pincer was still hovering above.

Just as this realization dawned on Sunny, he desperately rolled to the side. In the next moment, the pincer lunged down, sending small tremors through the mud. If not for his quick reaction, Sunny's chest would have been caved in by that blow.

He was just beginning to stand up when the pincer swiped sideways. Luckily, Sunny was ready: instead of trying to dodge or block the attack, he went with it, letting the pincer collide with his outstretched hands and cushioning the blow.

As his arms screamed in pain, Sunny used the force of the blow and allowed his body to be sent flying through the air. This way, at least, he would get out of the pincer's range.

He might not have been taught how to fight, but one thing he knew very well was how to fall!

Instead of breaking his neck or having the breath beaten out of him by the landing, he braced his body and nimbly rolled before stopping some distance away from the ambushing monster.

'I take it back!' Sunny thought, remembering his sarcastic critique of Hero's battle rolls. 'Rolling is an integral part of any respectable monster-fighting technique!'

Then, he looked up, trying to ascertain the situation.

In front of him, the attacker had finally shown itself. It burrowed from under the mud, casting a vast shadow over kneeling Sunny. Its tiny eyes were full of rage, hunger, and malice.

It was one of the pincer monsters he had spent so much time observing. Towering over him at almost three meters in height, the bulky creature moved its mandibles and produced a jarring, piercing screech.

'Why aren't you devouring the giant carcass with the rest of your buddies, you crab bastard?!'

However, the answer to Sunny's indignant plea was rather obvious. The monster seemed to be in a rather bad shape: half of its eight scythe-like legs were broken, and there were cracks in its thick carapace, each oozing with viscous azure blood. Additionally, he was missing one of its two pincer arms, which seemed to had been torn off entirely at the shoulder.

If not for this pathetic state, the creature would have had no need to hide in the mud, hoping to catch easy prey. It could have just followed the other monsters and joined on the feast. Sunny was just unlucky to stumble directly upon its ambush.

He had relied too much on the scouting abilities of his shadow, forgetting that it wasn't much more observant than an awakened human. It was also weightless and inaudible — that's why the monster did not react when the shadow had passed over its trap a minute earlier.

On the other hand, Sunny could also consider himself lucky — by the same logic, he would not have been able to dodge the creature's sudden attack if not for its crippled, slowed state.

But pondering on his luck could wait for later — right now, Sunny had a far more pressing thing to do. Namely, try to survive.

'Get back here!' he ordered the shadow and jumped to the side.

In the next second, the space he occupied a moment before was torn apart by the attacking monster. Its heavy pincer crashed into the side of a coral pillar, sending crimson shards flying in every direction.

Sunny caught his balance and continued moving. He was hoping that the bulky, heavily armored, wounded creature would not be able to match his speed, but unfortunately, it turned out to be surprisingly agile. Its scythe-like legs pierced the mud behind him, and

the pincer was already flying through the air again, threatening to decapitate the young man at any second.

Sunny ducked, dodging the pincer, and finally caught a second of reprieve. His eyes darted around, desperately searching for something to use as a weapon. Almost instantly, he noticed a long, smooth, sharp bone left behind by some unknown creature sticking from the mud. Without slowing down, he bent down and grabbed the bone, pulling it out with one forceful tug.

The bone was almost one and a half meters long, ending in a narrow, sharp tip. It was almost like a spear. The problem was, even with the added length of this makeshift spear, Sunny's range of attack was still shorter than the monster's. He also doubted that it was capable of piercing the hard carapace.

In short, he had to get close and aim for one of the cracks in the creature's armor. However, he didn't dare to. At that short of a distance, the monster could easily crush him into a paste by using just its weight and hulking frame.

A crazy idea entered Sunny's mind.

A bit shocked, he momentarily couldn't decide whether it was the product of audacity or foolishness. Either way, he wasn't insane enough to actually consider it.

At that moment, the pincer lashed out again. This time, Sunny was a little late to evade, and as a result, a sharp pain pierced his left leg. It was grazed by the edge of the pincer. The Puppeteer's Shroud held, not allowing the monster to draw blood, but the force of the impact was enough to throw Sunny tumbling to the ground.

There was no time to recover.

As his eyes opened wide, Sunny understood that it was time to act crazy. So, instead of trying to dodge, he stopped moving and allowed the monster to grab him across his torso with the pincer.

Immediately, a terrible pressure descended on his ribs. Sunny felt as though he was going to be split apart, but his armor, received from defeating an awakened tyrant, resisted the crushing bite of the monster's pincer. Every muscle in his body tensed, delaying the moment when his insides would be turned into mush.

In the next second, Sunny's shadow fell from above, wrapping itself around the Puppeteer's Shroud. With the protective properties of the armor enhanced, he was able to better resist the pincer's pulverizing embrace.

Sunny and the monster appeared to be at an impasse. The young man couldn't free himself from the monster's grip, while the monster could not kill the prey by cutting it in halves with its pincer.

They stared at each other. Then, an insane fire ignited in the creature's eyes. It clicked its mandibles and raised Sunny in the air, bringing him closer to its mouth, obviously intent on biting his head off.

'Why is everyone trying to eat me?! Am I that tasty?!'

Sunny didn't struggle as the monster brought him close to its mandibles. He knew he only had one chance to live.

In the last moment, Sunny allowed the shadow to flow from Puppeteer's Shroud onto the sharp bone he was still clenching in his hand. Then, he gathered all his strength, leaned forward and thrust the bone forward with as much power as he could.

Guided by his hand, the dark bone spear shot forward and pierced through the creature's tiny eye, sinking in deep. The other eye of the monster narrowed.

Gritting his teeth from the unbearable pain in his ribs, Sunny twisted the bone, trying to do as much damage to the creature's brain as possible.

For a couple of seconds, nothing happened. Then, he felt the pressure on his body diminishing.

The pincer opened, letting Sunny fall down. As he hit the mud, the hulking monster crashed to the ground, too. The bone spear was still sticking from its head, bathed in the streams of azure liquid.

Sunny moaned and drew in a raspy, painful breath.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[You have received a Memory: Azure Blade.]

[... Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-34: Only Steel Remembers

Sunny was sprawled in the mud, trying to catch his breath. The subtle voice of the Spell echoed in his ears.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Immediately, he felt a slight change. His body grew a little bit stronger, his vision a little sharper, his skin a little smoother. The change was minimal, but apparent.

'What was that?'

He had a guess, and it was easy to confirm. Sunny summoned the runes.

[Shadow Fragments: 14/1000].

Previously, he only had twelve of the mysterious shadow fragments, with no knowledge on how to acquire more. Now it seemed that the process was automatic: he only had to kill an enemy to absorb a part of their shadow and enhance his own core.

More than that, the number of fragments he was able to receive wasn't directly correlated to the number of slain enemies. After a bit of thinking, Sunny came to a preliminary conclusion: dormant soul cores gave him one fragment, while awakened ones gave two. However, only enemies he defeated directly — more or less — counted.

Killing the Mountain King's Larva, a dormant beast, had given him one shadow fragment. Finishing off the veteran slaver, a dormant human — another. Mountain King itself was an awakened tyrant, which meant that it had five awakened cores. With each giving Sunny two shadow fragments, he ended up with a total of twelve. And now, after killing the Carapace Scavenger, he had fourteen.

Interestingly, he didn't receive any fragments from the deaths of Shifty, Scholar and Hero, even though they perished as a result of his machinations. It seems he had to finish an enemy off with his own two hands to absorb a part of their shadow.

Well, or at least by summoning an ancient dead god.

The process was quite similar to how normal Awakened increased their power, with the only difference being that the steps of extracting and consuming the corresponding material, soul shards, were skipped in favor of instant absorption. That meant that shadow fragments could not be stored, and subsequently could not be bought or traded.

He won't have an opportunity to receive them as a reward for completing missions, providing services or selling various spoils. If Sunny wanted to grow stronger, his only option was to fight and kill.

'No peaceful life for me, I guess.'

Previously, Sunny thought that he at least had the choice to choose a relatively safe path. Many Awakened never left the confines of human Citadels and never faced Nightmare Creatures, choosing instead to perform various jobs in the Dream Realm just as they would in the real world.

They received payments in the form of soul shards, which were simultaneously the fuel of one's progression and the universal currency inside the Citadels. Sunny was never set on pursuing such a life, but not even having a choice was sort of irritating.

Luckily, there was a bright side, too. Without the need to use soul shards to strengthen his core, he would be able to spend everything he earns freely and without concern. After all, after he kills an enemy and absorbs the shadow fragments, the soul shard would still be there, ready to be collected and exchanged for something Sunny might need in the future.

That would effectively make him twice as efficient in terms of earning and spending, which was not a small advantage.

Additionally, there was the matter of the Shadow Core…

Since both Sunny and his shadow were tied to it, strengthening the core would not only increase Sunny's power, but also enhance the shadow. So, if he were to use it to further empower himself, the actual effect would be stacked, producing a twofold enhancement.

So, for each shadow fragment he collected, Sunny would actually be able to reap twice as much benefit as an Awakened would from a soul shard.

'Not bad. Not bad at all!'

Ah, the future was bright. Provided he survives and gets the opportunity to even have a future, of course.

Sitting up, Sunny moved his eyes and found the cluster of runes describing his Memories. Azure Blade… had he finally gotten a weapon?

Memory: [Azure Blade].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [On this forgotten shore, only steel remembers.]

'Huh. Interesting.'

Not very informative, but interesting.

Sunny summoned his new weapon, and a sharp, light sword immediately appeared in his hand. It was about a meter long, including the handle. The blade was straight and single-edged, ending in an angular tip. It was forged out of azure steel, with a beautiful layered pattern. Deep inside the steel, white sparks could be seen.

The crossguard was minimalistic and simple, offering almost no protection to the wielder's hands.

If Sunny knew his way around cold weapons, he would have called it a tang dao. However, he had no idea about such things: all he could gather was that the blade was single-edged, which meant that it was probably meant for slashing and cutting as opposed to piercing, and that the handle was long enough to accommodate two hands.

Also, the sword was pretty.

He summoned the shadow and made it wrap itself around the Azure Blade. Immediately, the steel became bluish-black, with a scattering of white sparks. It looked like a starlit night sky.

Sunny stood up and waved the sword a couple of times, getting accustomed to its weight. The sharp edge whistled as it cut the air.

'Well, now I finally look like a real Awakened.'

After that, he cast a gaze at the corpse of the carapace scavenger and grimaced. Eh, this part was not going to be pleasant.

After some time, he managed to break open the cracked carapace and cut away a few strips of tender, pink meat. He also did not forget to extract the radiant crystal from the beast's chest — the soul shard.

Without much hope, he tried to absorb the shard, remembering how it was supposed to be done — just as he expected, nothing happened.

'They're really of no direct use to me.'

With a shrug, Sunny placed the shard and the meat in a makeshift rucksack he weaved from black seaweed and looked at the sun.

The day was still young. He still had a good chance of making it to the distant hill before the sea came back. However, his left leg was banged up in the fight with the scavenger beast, so walking wasn't as easy as it was before. He gritted his teeth and began limping.

Hours passed. Due to his bruises and increased vigilance, Sunny's progress slowed down considerably. He was sweating and grinding his teeth, feeling pain with each step. What's worse, the further he reached into the labyrinth, the more confusing and entangled the paths became. Even with the shadow's help, he constantly had to backtrack and struggled to move in the right direction.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

If nothing changed, Sunny would not reach his goal. Which meant that he'll be crushed to death by the returning sea.

Not allowing himself to think about dying, Sunny tried to walk faster. However, he couldn't be too hasty: making a wrong turn would have taken precious minutes away from him, so he had to choose the way carefully. Additionally, failing to notice another ambush could end his life directly.

'Curses!'

Just when he was beginning to feel desperate, his shadow suddenly saw something that momentarily sent Sunny into a stupor.

Some distance further down the path, beyond a few turns, the corals widened, creating a small clearing. And in the middle of that clearing, someone was walking across the mud.

The first thing Sunny saw was fair skin… a lot of skin. The tall, lithe girl was only dressed in a makeshift skirt and a crude brassiere, both made out of seaweed. However, it didn't seem to bother her. With a calm expression, she stopped and looked back. The wind was playing with her short silver hair.

It was Nephis, the Changing Star.

In one hand, she was holding the end of a strange golden rope.

And on the other end of the rope, Cassia, the blind girl, was carefully following behind.

Chapter-35: A Shadow, a Star and an Oracle

Grey sky above, black mud below, an endless sea of crimson in between. On this dreamlike backdrop, two beautiful girls were walking across the labyrinth.

One was delicate and fragile, with blond hair and cerulean, aimless eyes. She was dressed in a simple tunic, with leather sandals on her feet and a cloak the color of sea waves draped around her shoulders.

The other was tall and lithe. She had silky silver hair and clear, grey eyes. Her revealing clothes were crudely made out of black seaweed, leaving her fair skin and athletic build exposed. She was poised, alert, and barefoot.

A golden rope connected two girls together.

'Wow. What a sight…' Sunny thought.

He suddenly regretted that he was not an artist. The picture just begged to be made into a painting.

'Wait… why am I thinking about that? People! I found people!'

His heart skipped a beat. If Nephis and Cassia were here, then the orange light from before, most likely, had something to do with them. Which meant that they knew how to get to the tall hill.

Which meant that Sunny didn't have to be crushed to death by the high tide!

'Uh… so what do I do now?'

He wasn't the best at ingratiating himself to other people. In fact, he was the polar opposite — people usually instinctively avoided him. And that was in normal circumstances. This time, however, he had spent a whole of four weeks making sure that everyone in the Academy hated his guts…

'Good job, Sunny!'

Still, he was at least useful. In this situation, an additional body was already a great boon when facing hungry monsters. And he wasn't just anyone: his ability to scout ahead alone was worth a lot. Surely they'll understand that… right?

With a heavy sigh, Sunny stepped into shadows and hurried to the clearing. He reached it in a minute or so, hiding and observing the two girls before making a final decision.

Helping herself with the wooden staff, blind Cassia slowly approached the middle of the clearing and extended her hand, finding Nephis and touching her on the shoulder.

"Why did you stop?"

Nephis supported the blind girl and glanced at the sky.

"It's getting late."

An awkward pause hung between two girls. After some time, Cassia asked:

"So you think we should turn back?"

Nephis blinked and cleared her throat.

"Yes."

Sunny was a bit amused by their exchange.

'What is she, a strong silent type?'

Then he returned to his dilemma and grimaced.

'How do I approach them? Damn, why is this so hard! It's not like I'm trying to ask them out on a date. I mean, one of them… both of them? What am I thinking about?! Just go and say hi!'

But then, if he suddenly appeared out of the shadows… not at all like a creep… how high was the probability of them getting spooked and attacking him before noticing that he was not a monster?

Wait, why would they… argh, to hell with this!

Deciding on the safest approach, Sunny commanded his shadow to abandon its hiding place and move to a spot where Nephis could clearly see it. He could clearly sense the shadow rolling its eyes as it obeyed the order.

As soon as the shadow started to move, Nephis suddenly snapped her hand sideways. Immediately, a long sword appeared in it, cutting the air as it assumed a defensive position. Before the shadow could even take two steps out of its hiding spot, it was already pierced by Changing Star's grey eyes.

The shadow froze. It seemed a bit startled.

Cassia took a step back.

"Neph? What is it?"

Nephis didn't answer immediately, carefully observing the shadow. Then she simply said:

"There's a shadow."

Cassia's doll-like face paled.

"A shadow? Scavengers?"

The tall girl tilted her head a little.

"No. It's a human shadow."

This was clearly not what Cassia expected to hear. With an expression of surprise, she asked:

"A human shadow? What… what is it doing?"

Nephis hesitated. After a while, she answered in a flat tone:

"...It's waving at us."

***

After a whole minute of silence, Cassia finally found the words to react.

"What?"

"I said: it's waving…"

"Yes, I know! I mean… why is it doing that?"

Nephis opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a distraction to lure us into a trap."

At this point, Sunny decided that it was time to talk. He inhaled deeply, then said in a friendly tone:

"Actually, I just sent it ahead to make sure that you don't stab me with that sword before realizing that I'm human."

Immediately, Nephis turned her head, pinpointing the exact location where Sunny was hiding in a blotch of shadows. Her sword slightly shifted, aiming at the new threat.

"If you're human, why are hiding in the shadows like a creep?"

'Goddamit! I'm not a creep!'

Sunny choked. But his Flaw was merciless: he had to provide an answer, and a truthful one at that.

"I mean, you're Changing Star Nephis. To be honest, I'm a little afraid."

Nephis did not answer. Because of her hard-to-read face, it was almost impossible to determine whether she believed him or not. However, he included her True Name in his answer for a reason: if he was some monster pretending to be human, he wouldn't have known it.

Luckily, Cassia was more expressive.

"Are you the boy who sat with me in the cafeteria?"

Sunny smiled. Meanwhile, Nephis glanced at the blind girl.

"Do you know him?"

Cassia nodded.

"I recognize his voice. His name is Sunless. He was in second-to-last place in the rankings, right above me."

The tall girl frowned, as if trying to remember. Then she asked:

"The pervert?"

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face, replaced by exasperation.

'Oh, come on!'

Cassia hesitated and didn't answer.

"Hey! I'm not really a pervert, you know! I just… uhm… said a few things. To a few girls. It was all a misunderstanding."

Nephis was silent for a few seconds, and then, finally, dismissed her sword.

"Okay. You can come out."

Sunny limped out of the shadows, summoning his own back. It flowed to his feet and reattached itself, visibly shaking. The bastard was laughing at him...

Stopping a few meters away from Nephis, he raised his hands, showing that he didn't mean the girls any harm. Changing Star gave him an inquisitive look.

"What happened to you?"

She was referring to his limp, bruises, and overall banged-up look. Sunny sighed.

"Carapace Scavenger."

Nephis raised an eyebrow:

"You managed to get away alive?"

'You bet I did!'

Sunny subconsciously straightened his back.

"I didn't get away. I killed it."

To prove his point, he gestured at his rucksack, full of delicious monster meat. Nephis looked him over again, reevaluating her opinion of him. Now, there were hints of approval in her eyes.

Carapace Scavengers were only beasts, but they were still awakened. With the addition of their mighty physique and natural armor, defeating one was not an easy feat for any Sleeper, who all had a dormant core. Let alone someone from the very bottom of the ranking list.

Come to think of it, it was even a bit too outstanding.

Sunny lowered his eyes.

"Eh… it was already wounded."

Nephis shrugged.

"A kill is a kill. You did well."

After that, she fell silent, as though not planning to say anything else. Sunny also wasn't sure what to say. Luckily, Cassia came to the rescue.

"Are you seriously injured?"

He shook his head.

"No, it's just that my ribs and leg are bruised — I'll be fine in a day or two. My armor is pretty resilient."

He wasn't worried that they might be tempted to kill him to get the Puppeteer's Shroud. That was because Memories were destroyed at the moment of their owner's death. So they only could be transferred voluntarily by a living person.

Well, there was always torture and blackmail. But he doubted that any one of the two beautiful girls would stoop to that.

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Before stumbling on the Scavenger, I was heading for the tall hill with the massive coral pillar on top. But after the fight, my speed decreased. Now I'm worried about not making it in time. Do you perhaps know the way?"

Cassia smiled.

"Actually, we spend the last days on that hill. We were just about to go back."

Nephis didn't say anything, looking at the sky.

Sunny licked his lips.

"Well… can I come with you?"

'They're not going to say "no"… right?'

The blind girl turned he head to her companion, a clear question written on her face.

"Neph?"

Nephis lowered her eyes, staring at Sunny. After a while, she said:

"No…"

'What?!'

"...problem."

No problem.

'What's wrong with you, princess?! Can't you speak faster?!'

Feeling his heart beating wildly in his chest, Sunny smiled.

"Well. Alright…"

Chapter-36: Bonfire

The rest of the way to the tall hill did not take a lot of time. With Nephis leading the way, taking all the right turns at all the right places, there was no need to explore the labyrinth and backtrack after encountering a dead end. Additionally, there were no scavengers around.

In fact, they could have moved ever quicker if not for Cassia, who walked slowly even with the help of her staff. Guided by the golden rope, she carefully explored the ground ahead before taking each step. The uneven paths of the crimson forest were not an ideal surface for a blind person to walk on.

Sunny didn't say much, periodically casting an incredulous glance at the strange pair. No matter how he looked at it, Cassia seemed to be dead weight. Perhaps it was cruel to say, but in the merciless reality of the Dream Realm, misguided kindness was a sure way to end up dead.

Before meeting and observing the girls, he still had hope that Cassia's terrible Flaw hid an unexpected and powerful Aspect. But from what he saw, it wasn't the case. If she couldn't even walk properly, what kind of power was there to hide? Nothing could outweigh the ruthless fact that the blind girl couldn't protect herself, and thus would only drag her companions down.

One had to be a fool or not fond of living to allow that to happen. So… which one of these descriptions suited Nephis? Somehow, he felt that neither did.

The sunset was not far off when they reached the hill. After climbing it and approaching the massive growth of coral, Nephis dismissed the golden rope and immediately summoned it again. This way, it was untied and appeared in her hands in a neat bundle.

'Ah. So it's a Memory.'

Sunny wondered what qualities the magical rope had. Soon, his curiosity was satisfied: right in front of his surprised eyes, the length of the rope suddenly began to increase. Soon, it was thrice as long as it was before.

Nephis calmly tied both ends of the rope into loops and then threw one of them into the air, accurately coiling it around a prominent protrusion near the top of the coral pillar. Then, she tested if the rope would hold, swiftly climbed up and waved from above, giving Sunny the signal to follow.

After hesitating for a second, Sunny approached the rope and grabbed it.

He couldn't help thinking that this would be the perfect opportunity to cut his head off. With him helpless while climbing and Nephis standing on the top of the pillar… yeah. The vivid picture appeared in his mind.

'Stop being paranoid!' Sunny thought, trying to calm himself down.

It's not that he was sure of Changing Star's impeccable moral qualities. Instead, he was certain of one thing: if Nephis really wanted to kill him, she wouldn't have needed to wait for an opportunity. She could have just cut him into ribbons whenever.

Simultaneously scared and reassured by this thought, Sunny nimbly climbed up and joined Nephis at the top of the coral mound. He then turned around and watched curiously, wondering how Cassia was going to get to them.

The blind girl dismissed the wooden staff and approached the rope. Then she caught it in a hand, traced it down to the loop at the end, and placed her foot inside. As soon as she was done, Nephis grabbed the rope and started pulling, lifting Cassia little by little until she had reached the top. She only had to grab Nephis's hand and make a step to join them.

'Huh. Efficient.'

The coral mound was much larger than the circular stone platform of the giant knight's neck. In fact, it was almost like a small island. At the highest point of the island, hidden behind some coral blades, the girls had made a little camp. There were piles of seaweed to sleep on, strips of scavenger meat drying under the sun, and a firepit.

Sunny pointed to the makeshift firepit.

"Was it you two nights ago? I've seen an orange light in the distance."

Cassia's face darkened.

"Yes, this was the first time we made a fire. But it turned out to be a really bad mistake."

Nephis sighed.

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Why?"

The blind girl touched her hair and turned her head to Nephis.

"At night, any light will attract monsters. We were attacked by scavengers first. And then… then…"

She paled and didn't finish. But she didn't have to: the memory of the colossal tentacle was still fresh in Sunny's mind.

It seemed that he was lucky to meet these two when he had. If not, he was certainly going to make a fire tonight to roast some scavenger meat.

"Uh. I see."

Nephis looked at the sky and cleared her throat.

"It should be fine now. We still have time before the sun sets."

After that, she got busy making the fire. Cassia simply sat on a pile of seaweed and waited. Not knowing what to do, Sunny lowered himself to the ground and let his tired, bruised body rest.

After a while, he said:

"I have fresh meat in my rucksack. Do you have water?"

Cassia smiled.

"Yes!"

After that, she extended an arm to him. A second later, a beautiful bottle made of patterned blue glass appeared in her hand.

"That's a Memory I have. It's always full."

Sunny took the glass bottle and looked at it with envy.

'An endless supply of water, huh? Sure beats my super loud bell!'

"Thank you."

He brought the bottle to his lips and greedily drank the cool, delicious water. Indeed, no matter how much he drank, the amount of water inside did not seem to decrease.

"Is it really endless?"

Cassia touched her hair again.

"Uh… not really. If you turn it upside down and let the water flow, it will stop in half an hour or so. But then it will be full again pretty soon."

At that time, Nephis was already done making the fire. Without looking up, she took Sunny's rucksack and opened it. Immediately, the soul shard rolled out. The tall girl looked at it, then at Sunny. Then she put the shard back in and pulled out the meat.

Sunny became tense, preparing a misleading answer. But Nephis did not ask. So, he pretended like nothing had happened and continued his conversation with Cassia.

"It's still a great Memory. Getting drinkable water is not an easy task!"

Cassia nodded and smiled, pleased by his words.

Soon, the rich smell of roasting meat permeated the air. At the same time, the sun was beginning to approach the horizon; a loud rumble came from somewhere beneath, and first traces of the black water began to appear between crimson walls of the labyrinth.

Sunny looked east, where the skies were already growing dark. Then he uncomfortably shifted.

"Do scavengers come all the way up here?"

Nephis turned the meat and nodded.

"Yes. But… only at night. In the day, most of them seem to disappear."

Sunny grinned, having an idea of why there weren't a lot of monsters in the labyrinth in the day.

"That's because they all gather near the place I had been spending my time recently. You should have seen it — the tall cliff to the west of here. Well, it's actually a statue."

Cassia opened her eyes wide.

"A… a statue? But for you to survive, it should be…"

"Yes, it's a giant statue of a knight, at least two hundred meters tall. He is missing his head, so I hid on top of the neck. Anyway… the day we were sent here, two sea creatures fought each other near that statue. When the water receded, I saw an enormous carcass lying there, with hundreds of scavengers slowly tearing it apart."

Nephis nodded.

"That would explain the lack of Nightmare Creature in the day. How long?"

Sunny blinked.

"How long what?"

Changing Star stared at him for a few seconds, making everyone feel uncomfortable.

"How long... until they are done devouring the carcass?"

"Oh. One day more, two at most."

Nephis turned away, took the meat away from the fire, and then quickly extinguished it.

'There's definitely something wrong with that girl!'

The three of them ate in the dimming light of the twilight. The meat was juicy, tender and indescribably delicious. It was better than anything Sunny had ever tasted, even back in the Academy's cafeteria. Of course, his excruciating hunger played a part in that.

From time to time, they would pass the glass bottle to each other.

When they were finished with their meal, the dark sea was back, and the night was upon them. Everything was consumed by absolute darkness.

Of course, Sunny could easily see both Nephis and Cassia. Under the cover of the night, Changing Star remained pretty much the same. The blind girl, however, allowed her true emotions to show, thinking that no one would see. She seemed much more lost, lonely and frightened than she did in the day.

As if trying to resist these feelings, Cassia said in a bright voice:

"How about we formally introduce ourselves? I'm Cassie."

Nephis glanced in her direction and shrugged.

"Neph."

Next, it was Sunny's turn. He exhaled, glad that they didn't ask his name directly. Most likely, he would still have been able to provide his human name — however, it also might have depended on the wording of the question.

Relieved, he smiled and answered:

"I'm Sunless. But you can call me Sunny."

Chapter-37: Getting to Know Each Other

Sunny was slowly growing fond of having conversations in the dark. Without the burden of light, people were more relaxed and honest. It reminded him of the frequent blackouts that used to sweep through the city when he was a little kid. His family had no choice but to huddle together and spend a few hours doing nothing but talking to each other.

Now, these dark hours had become some of his most precious memories.

He was silent for a few moments and then said:

"Since we're going to be depending on each other, should we share what abilities and Memories we have at our disposal?"

This was a logical suggestion. If they were going to fight side by side, knowing each other's strengths was more or less vital. Still, he noticed Nephis glancing in his direction with a guarded look on her face.

Luckily, he was obscured by darkness.

"I'll start," Sunny said, both to show his sincerity and to reveal information about himself in a controlled manner.

If he took the initiative to talk, he still had to tell the truth, but how much and to what extent was still for him to decide. If they were to ask and he had to answer, however… things would become unpredictable.

"My attributes give me an affinity to shadows. I also have a slight affiliation to divinity. Lastly, I am prone to finding myself in unlikely situations."

Cassie listened carefully, and then lowered her head, as though embarrassed.

"Uh… he is telling the truth. Not that we doubted your honesty!"

'Why not? I spent so much time earning the reputation of a pathological liar!'

Sunny cleared his throat and smiled, hiding his nervousness:

"Really? That's good to know. But… why are you so sure that I am being honest?"

The blind girl shifted a little.

"Oh! That's my Ability. I can "see" people's Attributes. Sometimes, I also receive, uh, "visions". They can be about the future or the past. I mean, that's what I think… it only happened a couple of times."

Sunny swallowed, but then relaxed.

'So, she is an oracle of sorts. Luckily, her insight is limited to Attributes… otherwise, I'd be in real trouble. Still, I'll have to be careful around her.'

He finally realized how the blind girl had known about his birthday. The question was whether she had seen it in a vision of the future or in a vision of the past. If it was the former, was it safe to assume that he would certainly be able to celebrate at least one more birthday?

Or did knowing the future actually affected and changed it? For example, after learning that he was definitely going to survive, Sunny might have naturally relaxed and lowered his guard. Then, he would die as the result of it. It surely seemed possible, right? That's assuming that the future could be changed. But maybe it wasn't?

Then…

Feeling his head hurting, Sunny decided to avoid this line of thought for now. Instead, he hid his inner turmoil and said in a friendly tone:

"That's a good Ability. Speaking of Abilities: you have already seen mine. My shadow can move independently and explore. It can't affect the material world, but we share sight and hearing. That way, I can spot danger before encountering it. The shadow is fast and stealthy: it can go anywhere and is almost impossible to notice.

Oh, I can also see in the dark."

He smiled, expecting the girls to understand and appreciate the utility of his Shadow Scout. Their reaction, however, was a bit strange: Nephis slowly turned her head in his direction, while Cassie became a bit pale and raised her hands to cover her chest.

"Uh… what?"

Nephis frowned and said in a flat tone:

"Have you ever used your Ability in the Academy?"

Sunny blinked.

'What a strange question!'

"In the Academy? Sure, of course. Why?"

Oh, right… they think that I'm a pervert…

Crap!

Before the girls could say anything, he hurriedly raised his hand and blurted:

"But I have never used it to do anything improper! You have to believe me!"

Fortunately, it was the honest truth. However, both Nephis and Cassie looked skeptical. Sunny gritted his teeth.

"I had more important things to do than… than whatever you're thinking about! I spent almost every waking hour learning how to survive!"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't seen you in class… even once."

Sunny chuckled.

"Of course, you didn't. While you were busy wiping the floor with other Sleepers, I was studying Wilderness Survival."

It was Changing Star's turn to blink.

"Wilderness… what? There is such a course?"

Cassie seemed equally puzzled.

"Yes, there is. It might seem like an afterthought for most people, but for an outskirts kid like me, who never went to a fancy school or saw a private tutor, learning how to

survive in the wilderness is the difference between life and death. Without it, I would have drowned the moment we were sent to the Dream Realm."

On a rare occasion, Nephis looked completely bewildered. She rubbed her wrists and stared thoughtfully in his direction.

"I see. I didn't know."

Sunny grimaced and struggled to keep the venom from seeping into his voice. When he finally spoke, his tone was light and amiable.

"That's okay. It's natural for someone of your status not to know…"

When he mentioned her status, a strange smile appeared on the Changing Star's face. But in the end, she didn't reply.

Sunny continued:

"Anyway, that's my Ability. As for Memories, I have three. One is an armor, one is a sword, and the last one is a really loud bell."

Now it was their turn to share. After a short pause, Nephis spoke:

"My attributes give me an affinity to light and fire, as well as a strong affiliation to divinity. I have two Memories: a rope…"

While she was speaking, Sunny was looking at Cassie, trying to read her expression. From what he saw, Nephis was telling the truth — but also, not the whole truth. And judging by how hard the blind girl was trying to hide her true feelings, the secret hiding among Changing Star's Attributes was not at all trivial.

'Interesting.'

"...and a sword. The rope is very sturdy and can change its length. The sword is very sharp and can protect its wielder against souls attacks, to a certain extent. My Ability… can be used to heal."

Sunny didn't miss the wording of the last part. "Can be used to heal"... does this mean that its main purpose was something else? He was pretty sure that Nephis would not reveal all of her cards, just like him. However, healing abilities were extremely rare. Having one that could heal, but was not limited to healing — that would be simply unheard of.

But then again, she was Changing Star — one of the few people in history to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare. If Sunny were to consider his own Aspect Ability, nothing seemed impossible.

'I wonder what her Aspect rank is.'

Outwardly, he pretended to be excited.

"You're a Healer? That's great! Having a Healer among us is incredible luck!"

Cassie nodded and smiled.

"Neph is also an amazing fighter! You should have seen her dealing with those scavengers. Well… I also did not actually see it. But it sounded very scary."

Sunny didn't need anyone to tell him how formidable of a warrior Nephis was. He had seen it with his own two eyes. Sort of. Actually, they were his shadow's eyes. Well… whatever it had instead of eyes.

Meanwhile, Cassie sighed.

"It's my turn? Uh… my attributes are nothing special. I guess I have an affinity to revelations and fate. My Ability is like I told you before. It's not very useful. About my Memories, I have three: the bottle, the wooden staff and this armor.

You already know about the bottle. The staff can create wind. The armor is actually of the Awakened rank… uh, Neph gave it to me when we met. It has a very powerful protective charm."

'So… she's not only carrying Cassie on her back, she even gave away her only clothes? An Awakened-rank armor, at that? What… what is Nephis thinking about?'

The blind girl turned away and added after a while:

"I used to be a pretty decent fencer… before. Now I can't really fight."

The last two sentences were obviously related to her Flaw. Sunny and Nephis, however, both chose to keep theirs secret. Despite the fact that knowing your companion's Flaw was also important for cooperation and having each other's backs, sharing something like that demanded a very high level of trust.

Right now, there was no trust between them. And even if there was, Sunny did not plan to ever share his Flaw with anyone. Nephis, too, seemed to have a lot of secrets.

After a while, he said:

"Good. That's good. I think we have enough tools to survive, provided we use them right. I guess it's time to sleep?"

In the darkness, Nephis tilted her head, listening to his words with a distant look.

"Alright. I'll… take watch first."

Sunny decided to be helpful and said:

"Actually, my shadow doesn't sleep. It can wake us up if something happens."

Changing Star slowly smiled.

"I'll take watch first."

Feeling a bit of coldness in her voice, Sunny sighed and shrugged.

'Suit yourself. What are you going to watch, huh? You can't even see anything! Whatever. Just don't blame me when something giant swallows us in the middle of the night…'

Then he suddenly shuddered.

'Wait... that was not a death flag, right? Right, of course not. No way...'

Chapter-38: Questions in the Dark

Sleep was avoiding Sunny. For a while, he sat silently in the darkness, listening to the calming rumbling of the waves. In this rare moment of respite, memories of the past few days came flooding into his mind. However, he was too tired to seriously think about anything. He was warm, full, and relatively safe. For now, that was more than enough.

Soon, the rhythm of Cassia's breathing changed, indicating that she fell asleep. Nephis was guarding the camp, motionless and, as always, a bit distant. With her silver hair and fair skin, she looked like an alabaster statue.

Sunny sighed. He struggled for a bit, and then said quietly:

"Hey. Can I ask you a question?"

Nephis glanced at him and shrugged. The lack of an audible response clearly indicated that she remembered about his ability to see in the dark.

"Sure."

'Would it be too personal?'

Sunny hesitated.

"I thought you Legacies come into the Spell with a whole inherited arsenal of Memories. I mean, that's supposed to be your main advantage. How come you only had three?"

Nephis was silent for a few moments.

"Actually, I only had two. The rope came from Cassie."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh. I see."

Realizing that her answer wasn't really an answer, Nephis thought for a while and added:

"We lost most of our Memories when my father passed away. The ones that remained were sold one by one over the years, to keep the family afloat. This sword and armor came from my First Nightmare."

So that's how it was. Sunny realized that the fall of the Immortal Flame clan might have been more thorough than he had thought. Still, something about it didn't make sense.

"Surely, with your clan's reputation and standing, there were other ways to make money."

Without any strong reaction, Nephis simply said:

"There were other reasons."

Then, she unexpectedly turned her head in his direction.

"Can I ask you a question in return?"

Sunny swallowed.

"Yeah, go ahead."

Nephis tilted her head.

"How did you know that I'm a Legacy?"

'What? That's it?'

"Simple. I heard Caster mention it. He was scolding other Sleepers to make them treat you with respect."

She gave him a nod and turned away. What thoughts were hidden behind her calm grey eyes, Sunny did not know.

Some time had passed before he gathered enough courage to ask the question that he really wanted to ask. Before doing it, though, he made sure that Cassie was sound asleep and lowered his voice.

"Can I ask another question?"

Without getting a negative response, he continued:

"Why are you burdening yourself with her?"

A corner of Changing Star's mouth curled up slightly.

"Why? Wouldn't you?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling the Flaw pushing the truthful answer out of his mouth.

"No."

To be honest, he wanted to believe to the last moment that the answer would be "yes". But one of the things he had lost after the Nightmare was the ability to lie to himself. Truth was merciless.

It's not that Sunny did not pity the blind girl or didn't want to help her. It's just that he knew with certainty that it was simply not something he could do. He was barely able to save himself, let alone carry a helpless person across the Dream Realm. If he tried, they would just die together.

Still, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed in himself.

Nephis, however, did not seem to judge him. She showed no reaction at all. After a few moments, she simply said:

"Because I want to."

'Because… she wants to?'

That was not the response Sunny expected to hear. He was pretty sure that she would either lecture him about virtue and compassion or disclose some obscure way to make Cassie's seemingly weak Ability incredibly useful.

However, she did neither. Nephis expected him to believe that she was putting her life in danger, to the point of sacrificing an awakened armor-type Memory, because that was something she simply wanted to do.

'Ridiculous!'

At first, he dismissed her response as a non-answer. But the more he thought about it, the more disturbed he felt.

Because, maybe, it was actually the truth.

Due to the circumstances of his life, Sunny had never really done things because he wanted to. Most of the time, he was doing them because he needed to. It was never a question of "want"... it was always a question of "must". For him, this was a basic rule of life.

But was it really? Or was it just a matter of perspective? Nephis had certain advantages in her upbringing, but they weren't as ample as he had imagined. She had no wealth and no arsenal of relics to empower her. However, she did have a mentality that was different from Sunny's.

It wasn't impossible for her to have the audacity to disregard need in favor of something as frivolous as desire, and do things that a normal person like Sunny would never do.

Like helping a blind girl simply because that was what Nephis wanted to do.

Perhaps, that mentality was the greatest advantage of all.

Perhaps, that was the real barrier that separated Legacies from the rest of them.

That was a lot to think about. However, before Sunny could gather his thoughts, Nephis suddenly spoke again.

"My turn."

'Uh… does she mean it's her turn to ask a question?'

Indeed, that was what she meant. Changing Star once again turned to Sunny and, after a long pause, suddenly asked:

"Do you know the legend of Odysseus?"

'A what… who? What sort of a weird question is that?!'

Bewildered, Sunny shook his head. Then, remembering that she couldn't see him, he said:

"No."

Nephis sighed and turned away. A few moments later, she softly said:

"Odysseus was a hero in an ancient war. In the legends, some humans back then had powers akin to the Awakened. Achilles with an Aspect of indestructible body, Diomedes that was so ferocious even the God of War was wary of him, Ajax who was as strong as a giant. Odysseus was not the strongest, and not the bravest. However, he was the most cunning."

Sunny blinked, staring at the silver-haired girl.

'What? Where did this come from? Why is she suddenly so eloquent?'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"In the end, Odysseus's cunning ended the war, and he prepared to sail home. However, the gods cursed him to endlessly wander the seas, never to return. Over the years, he survived one horror after another and lost all of his companions. Then, shipwrecked, he found himself on an island where the beautiful fairy, Calypso, lived."

Changing Star's ethereal, strangely wistful voice resounded in the darkness, creating an enthralling atmosphere. Sunny couldn't help but listen with the utmost attention.

"Calypso fell in love with Odysseus and invited him to her palace. For many years, they lived together in harmony. The island was like a paradise, filled with all kinds of wonders, delicacies and delights. As long as loving Calypso was by his side, Odysseus was even immortal. But… the longer he stayed, the more time he spent sitting on the shore, looking at the sea with bleak eyes."

Nephis smiled.

"In the end, Odysseus built a makeshift boat and abandoned the island, leaving all its delights, the beautiful fairy, and even his immortality behind. So, my question is… why did he leave?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

What kind of a mind game was that? He even considered that Nephis was mocking him, but it didn't seem to be the case. It looked like she was sincerely interested in the answer.

'Weirdo!'

He thought for a bit, and then said without too much conviction:

"Maybe it was because he was far away from home?"

A fleeting smile appeared on Nephis's face.

"Far away… from home. Hm. Alright."

After that, she turned away and lowered her head, becoming like a statue again.

It seemed like their conversation was over.

Grumbling internally, Sunny lay down and tried to fall asleep. However, the image of bleak-eyed Odysseus kept appearing in his mind. After a while, he whispered:

"Well? Did he make it back home?"

Soon, Nephis replied.

"Yes. He returned to his wife and son, and they lived happily ever after."

Satisfied, Sunny smiled and turned on his side.

When he was already half-asleep, he heard Changing Star's quiet voice once again. This time, it was barely audible and aimless, as though not directed at anyone.

"Odysseus was the first human to break the will of gods."

***

In the morning, Sunny and Nephis were the first to get up. While the sun was rising and the sea was retreating, they made a fire and began preparing a simple breakfast.

With Cassia still asleep, they did not talk to each other much. It was like the last night's conversation did not happen. However, after some time, they somehow ended up discussing the plan for the next few days. Nephis had some ideas.

"With what you told us about scavengers crowding to the west, the logical step would be to start moving east as soon as we can. Of course, north and south are also acceptable, but that won't put as much space between us and the enemy."

Sunny nodded, agreeing with that logic.

"We have explored to the east a little, but not enough to confidently make it to the next high point in a day. That's why the best course of action would be to spend today scouting a path to that group of cliffs over there and move the camp tomorrow."

He sighed.

"Do you have any idea where we are? Would there be a human Citadel to the east?"

Nephis shook her head.

"I've never heard of a region that fits the characteristics of this place. In any case, we have to move to find out more. We'll either find a Citadel, encounter an unconquered Gateway… or die. East is as good of a direction as any. Plus, it's the safest, because there's a horde of monsters to the west."

At that point, Cassie suddenly sat up straight. Her eyes were wide open, and her face was a little pale. She looked nervous and excited.

Nephis frowned.

"Cassie? What's the matter?"

The blind girl turned to them and smiled.

"A… a vision! I had a vision!"

'Like… a prophetic dream?' Sunny thought, trying to come to terms with this new reality of someone being able to see the future. Or the past.

Meanwhile, Changing Star stretched her hand, as though prepared to summon her sword.

"Are we in danger?"

Cassie energetically shook her head.

"No, it's not that! People… I saw a castle full of people!"

She smiled at pointed with her finger.

"I don't know how far it is, but I'm sure that it's in that direction!"

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, not knowing whether to be glad or petrified.

Cassie's small, delicate finger was confidently pointing west.

Chapter-39: Journey to the West

In the ensuing silence, the smile slowly disappeared from Cassie's face, replaced by confusion. Feeling the sudden tension, she asked:

"Uh… what's wrong?"

Sunny sighed.

"No, nothing is wrong. It's just that that direction is the one we wanted to avoid."

After some thought, he added:

"That's where I came from yesterday. There's a lot of scavengers down there."

The blind girl's face fell.

"Oh."

Nephis, who was quietly listening to them, gave him an indecipherable look and finally spoke:

"Tell us more about the castle."

A shadow of the previous excitement returned to Cassie's eyes. With a serious nod, she began describing her vision.

"I dreamt of a vast, ruined city built of weathered stone. It was surrounded by tall, impregnable walls. Various monsters were wandering its narrow streets. In the center of the city, there was a hill, and on that hill stood a magnificent castle."

She smiled.

"But there were no monsters in the castle! Instead, it was full of people. I think… no, I'm sure that they were Awakened. Some were guarding the walls, some were going about their lives without a care in the world. There was food, safety, and laughter!"

'Well, that sounds great.'

If this castle really existed, then all of their problems would be solved. Sunny cleared his throat.

"Did you see anything else?"

Cassie frowned, trying to remember. Then, her face cleared.

"Yes! I saw Sunny leading me through the gates of the castle! That means we will make it!"

A brilliant smile appeared on her doll-like face, beaming with so much joy that Sunny couldn't help but curl his lips.

Inwardly, however, he was stuck on a certain detail of Cassie's vision. It was that, when talking about reaching the castle, the blind girl only mentioned the two of them. Was there some meaning behind it?

Sunny turned his head a little and secretly glanced at Nephis, trying to discern if she had picked up on that little discrepancy, too.

Changing Star, however, was as enigmatic as ever. Without showing much emotion, she thought for a while, and then slowly nodded.

"Okay. Then we will go west."

***

While the sea was still retreating, they had their breakfast and then spent some time planning for the journey and preparing to abandon the temporary camp. In the process, Sunny had a chance to get to know the girls a little better.

It was then that he came to a sudden realization, which almost made his head explode from bafflement. That mind-blowing realization had to do with Nephis.

Back when they first met in front of the Academy's gates, Sunny had formed a certain impression of the confident, distant girl. Later, her behavior and the different revelations about Changing Star's past only served to reinforce that impression.

Nephis seemed to exist a bit apart from the world. She was mysterious, aloof and rather cool. Her taciturn character and strange speech patterns made people interacting with her feel unnerved and rattled, often revealing more than they had been planning to. The

less she talked, the more she seemed to know. That silent, indifferent confidence was arresting, and sometimes even oppressive.

However, that impression turned out to be completely wrong!

The actual truth behind the matter had nothing to do with being cool and aloof. After talking to her a bit more and observing their interactions with Cassie, Sunny almost fainted when he realized that Nephis was simply an incredibly, ridiculously... painfully awkward person.

It was as though she had no idea how to talk to people. Every time she tried to convey something, she would either use the wrong words or stumble in the middle of the sentence and fall silent. Her tone never matched what she was trying to say. Often, she would forget to put correct intonations in her speech, making questions sound like statements or vice versa.

Added to that was the fact that, like many introverted people, Nephis was not in a habit of openly showing her emotions. It's not that she didn't have feelings: it's just that she was really bad at emoting them! As a result, her face always looked cold and neutral.

That's why, most of the time, she simply chose to talk as little as possible or not to talk at all.

All of that added up together, then multiplied by her general weirdness, was ultimately responsible for creating the false image of a mysterious, unapproachable ice princess.

When in fact, she was just shy and completely inept in communicating with people!

After coming to that realization, Sunny tried with all his might but still failed to stop himself from staring at Nephis with wide eyes. He just barely managed to not let his jaw hang open.

'What the hell? That's not in line with how a protagonist should be!'

In his mind, Nephis had definitely been the type of person to be the main character of any event. At the center stage, there were always confident, strong people like her and Caster. People like himself and Cassie, on the other hand, were relegated to exist far away in the background. Now, however…

No, that line of thought was also wrong. The fact that Changing Star had problems with expressing herself and lacked social skills did not mean that she was not strong. In fact,

it might have meant the opposite. She still achieved everything that she had achieved, but with the added layer of adversity.

She was still dangerous.

At that moment, Nephis finally noticed that Sunny was staring at her. She looked at him and, after a long pause, asked in an emotionless tone:

"...What?"

He blinked, extricating himself from this sudden flood of thoughts, and cleared his throat.

"Uh, nothing. I was just going to ask when are we setting off."

Nephis appeared to be thinking. After a while, she turned away and said:

"Soon."

'You... you really can't manage more than one word, can you?'

Utterly bewildered, Sunny hid his emotions and smiled.

"Ah. Alright then."

***

In the grey light of morning, they abandoned the tall hill and ventured west, retracing their steps from yesterday. Knowing the path, the small party made quick progress.

Nephis was walking in front, her sword arm ready to strike at any moment. A bit behind her was Sunny. This time, the responsibility of holding the golden rope and guiding Cassie along was entrusted to him.

Of course, the actual person… creature?.. leading them was his shadow. It scouted ahead, carefully observing the labyrinth for signs of danger.

The labyrinth was just as it was before, confusing and seemingly endless. Crimson blades of "coral" protruded from the black mud, creating a vast, tangled forest. However, today something about it felt different.

It wasn't long before the shadow stumbled onto a mass of hulking, hungry scavengers…

Chapter-40: Weak Point

"Halt!" Sunny whispered, observing the group of scavengers through his shadow.

As soon as the word left his lips, Nephis immediately summoned her sword. After studying the surroundings for a second, she turned her head and glanced at him with a question in her eyes.

Cassia, meanwhile, froze in place and hesitantly raised her staff.

Sunny counted the monsters: one, two, three… five…

'Curses!'

The hulking beasts seemed like the losers of the pack, similar to the one he had killed. However, their wounds were not as pronounced and terrible. Each of them was much more of a threat than the mangled one from before, and there were half a dozen of them at least.

"There are scavengers on the path ahead, six of them. They're slowly moving in our direction."

Nephis cast a gaze forward. There was a calculating look on her face.

"They're done with the carcass?"

Sunny thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. But maybe there's not enough meat for everyone anymore, so some stragglers had no choice but to leave with an empty stomach."

Nephis nodded and gestured to a nearby branching path.

"We'll circle around them."

The three Sleepers hastily moved forward and changed paths, giving a wide berth to the group of monsters. Tense and grim, they continued walking, trying to stay on course and not get lost in the labyrinth.

However, in the next hour, they had to turn in a random direction again and again, avoiding other scavengers. The distance between them and the giant statue was not shortening at all.

At some point, they were catching their breath near one of the numerous dead ends of the crimson labyrinth. They had no choice but to wait, since a large number of creatures was moving past their hiding spot, separated from them by a long length of a twisting coral passage.

Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"We can't go on like that. At this rate, we'll never make it to safety before sunset."

Cassie was the first one to react.

"Maybe… maybe we should turn back?"

That was a reasonable suggestion. However, Sunny felt reluctant to agree.

Nephis shared his thoughts. With a blank expression, she said:

"It will only get harder tomorrow."

She was right. By tomorrow, there would be even more scavengers flooding the labyrinth.

"Then what should we do?"

Changing Star tilted her head, thinking. After a while, she turned to Sunny.

"Fight."

Fight? Fight against dozens of those monstrosities? Was she crazy?

Sunny tried to hide his derision as he spoke:

"I know that you are skilled with the sword, but have you forgotten that each of those things is a whole rank above us? We won't survive in a fight against many."

Nephis nodded.

"We avoid large groups. Cut down smaller ones."

After a moment, she added:

"If there's one or two of them, there's a chance."

Sunny wanted to retort, but couldn't find a good reason. In the end, he gave up.

"Fine."

Nephis stared at him for a while. Then, she suddenly asked:

"Have you studied the corpse of the scavenger you had killed?"

What was that supposed to mean?

A bit surprised, Sunny shook his head.

"No."

He was too busy being in pain and trying to make it to safety before the sea returned. And why would he study a corpse?

'Wait. I think Teacher Julius mentioned something…'

After a short pause, Nephis spoke:

"Scavengers have three weak points on their bodies. The first one is obvious: it's their joints. Anything that has to be flexible can't be too rigid. So, there's gaps in the armor above the joints. By targeting the joints, you can diminish their mobility and attack capacity."

Oh… so, by studying a dead monster, one could better understand their strengths and vulnerabilities. This idea was so obvious that Sunny admonished himself for not realizing sooner.

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"The second one is the same. It's where their torso connects to the carapace. If you manage to accurately hit that spot, you can heavily injure a scavenger and deal serious

damage to its body. However, unless you succeed in severing its spine, the wound won't be fatal. It'll still be able to fight for a while."

Sunny couldn't help but notice that Changing Star's awkwardness seemed to disappear whenever she talked about things that she felt confident about, like ancient heroes. Or killing things.

'Curious.'

"The last weak point is on their back, approximately at the level where the eyes are. There's a slightly concave, discolored cavity in their armor. It is where several armor plates connect. The chitin there is comparatively thin. If you can pierce through it, you can destroy the brain directly. That will be a killing blow."

'That is good to know. However, that weak point was too high to be hit by a human — after all, scavengers were more than two meters tall!'

As though reading his thoughts, Nephis added:

"That weak point is very hard to target. Circling around a scavenger is almost impossible due to their size, speed and the attack range of their pincers."

She looked at him and calmly said:

"If we stumble on a single scavenger, I'll be the bait. My task will be to make it turn around and then restrain it, exposing the third weak point. Your task will be to kill it."

Sunny gulped.

"What if there's two of them?"

As usual, Nephis paused before answering.

"Don't die."

***

It wasn't long before they were left with no choice but to attempt a fight against a scavenger. Behind them, there was a long stretch of the labyrinth with no suitable branching paths for them to turn onto. Ahead of them, there was a small clearing with only one other passage leading out of it.

Not far into that passage, a massive scavenger was moving slowly in their direction.

Sunny quickly described the situation and waited for Changing Star's feedback. Without much delay, she gave him a nod.

"We fight in the clearing."

After that, Nephis gently guided Cassie to the wall of the labyrinth and helped her find a place to sit.

"Wait here. We'll be back."

After some thought, she added.

"Soon."

As Nephis moved to walk away, Cassie grabbed her hand. Her face was pale and tense.

"Neph, you… be careful, okay?"

Nephis blinked and tilted her head a little. Then, she smiled.

"Uh. Sure."

With that, she and Sunny hastily headed for the clearing.

By the time they got there, the scavenger was seconds from appearing. Sunny's shadow flew out of the passage and reattached itself to his feet. Without having to discuss things with Nephis, he quickly hid in the shadows and waited there, hoping for a chance to attack.

Nephis, on the other hand, strolled to the center of the clearing and calmly stood there, her shoulders relaxed and her back straight. An elegant longsword appeared in her hands, carelessly pointed to the ground.

Not knowing what else to do, Sunny silently repeated her words:

'Don't die.'

A second later, the scavenger walked into the clearing. When his tiny eyes spotted Nephis, an evil light ignited in them. Without wasting even a second, the massive monster screeched and rushed forward to attack.

Its huge pincer shot forward with terrifying speed, tearing the air in its path.

Nephis swiftly sidestepped, dodging the pincer, then leaped backward, removing herself from the path of the rushing monster. Simultaneously, her sword flashed in the air, cutting deep into the joint of one of the scavenger's front legs.

Azure blood spattered on the ground.

Of course, this small wound was too insignificant to slow the scavenger down. With surprising agility, it twisted and delivered a crushing sideways swipe. Nephis, who just barely landed on her feet, had no choice but to deflect the blow with her sword. She managed to disperse most of the impact by holding the blade at the right angle, but the remaining force was still enough to throw her off balance.

At that moment, the second pincer came down. Instead of trying to regain her equilibrium, Changing Star went with the fall and somersaulted over one hand, ending up distancing herself from the monster a bit. Her sword lashed out again.

The follow-up attack followed almost immediately.

However, Sunny did not care about the details anymore. The only thing he cared about was that, through this risky series of dodges and leaps, Nephis had managed to circle to the opposite side of the clearing, forcing the scavenger to turn its back to the shadow in which he hid.

'It's now or never!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny lunged forward.

Before Changing Star finished her last dodge…

Before the scavenger's pincer crashed on her from above…

Before Sunny had time to become scared…

He closed the distance between himself and the monster and jumped with all his might, landing on top of its carapace. Then, he used all of his weight to thrust a hand forward.

Azure Blade shimmered into existence in his grip and was immediately swallowed by the shadow. A breath later, the dark blade hit precisely into the concave, discolorated cavity in the scavenger's armor. With a crack, the chitin broke, allowing the tip of the sword to sink deep into the scavenger's body.

The monster shuddered, and then heavily fell to the ground.

Sunny was thrown from its carapace, landing in the mud with a roll.

'That… that easy?'

It was already over?

As though to answer him, the Spell's voice resounded in the air:

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-41: Strength in Numbers

Sunny was sprawled in the mud, looking at the sky. He didn't even have to catch his breath since the whole fight took less than ten seconds from start to finish. No one was dead, wounded or even bruised… well, with the exception of the scavenger. It was completely out of his expectations.

He glanced at the monster's corpse to make sure that it was actually dead, then summoned the runes and took a look at the number of Shadow Fragments in his possession.

[Shadow Fragments: 16/1000].

It was actually true. The mighty awakened beast perished just like that. And, although Nephis did most of the work, he was the one to deal the killing blow.

'Why can't it always be so easy?'

Sunny got back on his feet and dismissed the Azure Blade. Then, he remembered the words Master Jet had once told him: "No one can survive in the Dream Realm alone."

Back then, he noted her advice, but didn't really believe it. After all, he had always strived to be self-sufficient, not allowing himself to depend on anyone. In Sunny's mind, this was the true meaning of strength.

However, now he was beginning to suspect that this logic was flawed. Indeed, having someone to share your burdens meant the difference between heaven and hell here in the Dream Realm. If he was alone, fighting against a single scavenger might have been the end of him.

Similarly, even though Nephis was far more skilled than Sunny, it would have been extremely hard for her to defeat the armored monster alone, being that its weakest point was out of her reach.

But together, they had accomplished it with relative ease. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts. In other words, there was strength in numbers that surpassed

individual power. In that sense, being able to depend on a group was not a sign of weakness, but, on the contrary, an important facet of personal strength.

Lone wolves would always be at a disadvantage. That was another lesson to learn.

'It's not like I had much of a choice.'

He walked over to Nephis and checked if she was okay. Apart from slight damage to her makeshift seaweed clothes, everything seemed to be alright. She glanced at Sunny.

"Memory?"

He shook his head.

Nephis sighed. It seemed that she was a bit impatient to get herself a suit of armor of her own. If Sunny was a gentleman, he would have suggested to loan her the Puppeteer's Shroud for a while… but alas, he wasn't. That armor was extremely valuable and had cost him a lot.

Plus, unlike Changing Star, the picture of Sunny wearing nothing but a seaweed loincloth would have been more disturbing than aesthetically pleasing. So, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, Nephis headed for the dead scavenger and said without turning her head:

"Bring Cassie."

With a sigh, Sunny turned around and left the clearing.

Soon, he approached the place where the blind girl was waiting patiently for their return. Hearing his footsteps, she flinched and raised her head:

"S—Sunny?"

'How did she recognize me? Ah... must be the way I walk.'

"Yeah, it's me. Everything is over. Come on, I'll bring you to Nephis."

Using the wooden staff, Cassie stood up and turned to him.

"Are… are you guys alright?"

Sunny smiled.

"Of course! We dispatched that critter in no time. Didn't even get a scratch."

Cassie smiled with visible relief.

"Good, that's good. Oh, right, the rope…"

Sunny took the rope and guided the blind girl back to the clearing. On the way, he felt a bit weird. With the delicate girl walking behind him, he couldn't help but think of his little sister. As a toddler, she used to follow him around too, as though they were glued together.

As the familiar pain stabbed him in the heart, Sunny gritted his teeth and tried to think about something else. It was all in the past anyway.

Back in the clearing, Nephis was done breaking apart the scavenger's carapace. The shimmering soul shard was already in her hand. Without saying anything, she tossed it to Sunny.

He caught the crystal and looked at her with surprise.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

Nephis blinked and stayed quiet for a few seconds. Then she said as a matter of fact:

"I don't have pockets."

"Oh."

Still a bit bewildered, Sunny put the soul shard into his rucksack.

'But why wouldn't she just absorb it?'

He opened his mouth to ask the question, but she seemed to realize something and added:

"We'll divide the spoils later."

"Ah. Alright."

Nephis, meanwhile, turned to Cassie and said after some deliberation:

"I was careful."

Then, she smiled.

***

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny was feeling somewhere in-between of being ecstatic and peeved. Throughout the day, they managed to kill three more scavengers, each time with not much risk to anyone except for Nephis. The process was largely the same: after discovering the monster, he would hide in the shadows, while Nephis would act as bait.

Then, when the time was right, Sunny would stealthily approach and finish the fight with a precise strike of the Azure Blade.

He was wondering if that was what being in the main hero's party felt like. To anyone else, maybe with the exception of Caster, dancing around a deadly awakened beast would have been a tall task, most likely ending with the dancer's death. Nephis, however, had managed to do it over and over again seemingly without too much strain.

What's more, her performance was based solely on skill, with no Aspect Ability involved. In that regard, even Caster couldn't have done better.

She was swift, calm and precise. Every move she made was calculated and perfectly timed. She seemed to innately understand the flow and logic of combat, which gave her the ability to roughly predict what actions the mindless beasts would perform in the next seconds. Then it was just the question of physical prowess to evade and even manipulate them to a certain degree.

Sunny had always known that skill and experience were more important than raw power, but by watching Nephis, he vividly understood just how vast the difference between them was. Even though his divine Aspect allowed Sunny to exert more strength and speed than Changing Star, in an actual fight, he would never stand a chance.

Of course, he was also an important part of every encounter. His role as the finisher was not trivial, and not just anybody would have been able to accomplish four kills with four strikes. Even though Sunny was not taught any elaborate techniques, he was still a somewhat experienced fighter. He had good physical coordination, combat intuition, and — most importantly — a cool-headed mentality.

Not to mention the fact that they were only able to ambush the scavengers so effectively due to his shadow scouting them out in advance.

All in all, it was an almost equal cooperation. Still, watching Nephis fight was nothing short of sobering.

Trying not to get too dejected, Sunny summoned the runes.

[Shadow Fragments: 22/1000].

'Eight fragments today. Pretty excellent.'

Currently, they were waiting on the edge of the labyrinth path leading directly to the giant statue of the headless knight. There was a group of scavengers between them and the statue, moving past without any haste.

The sunset was near, but they still had time.

Slowly, minutes flowed by. At some point, Nephis gave the command to move.

Helping Cassie along, Sunny followed Changing Star and quickly traversed the open space between the labyrinth and the statue. Now, they only had to get on top of it.

However, it wasn't that easy. Scaling the two-hundred-meter tall monument would have been hard in normal circumstances, but now, they also had to somehow pull Cassie up. Leaving her behind until they were at the top would not have been safe.

In the end, Nephis and Sunny took turns pulling the rope every twenty meters or so. Cassie would hold onto the rocks and wait until they climbed higher, and then the process would repeat. It was slow and torturous, and by the end, Sunny's muscles were sore and almost on fire.

But they managed to get to safety before the dark waters washed them away.

As the night began to descend, the three Sleepers sat in the center of the circular stone platform and rested. As they did not bring any materials to make a fire and it was already too late, there was no way to cook food. They ended up chewing on the strips of dried meat, passing the bottle of limitless water around.

After some time, Nephis gave Sunny a sign to take out the spoils of today's journey. He took out the four shimmering soul shards and put them on the ground.

Without any discussion, Changing Star moved two crystals in his direction and took two for herself. Then, she gave one of hers to Cassia.

Sunny watched it in silence. By the time Nephis and Cassie had absorbed their soul shards, he still didn't make a move to take his. After a while, he took another crystal out of the rucksack and moved all three to Nephis.

The silver-haired girl looked at him with surprise.

"Don't you want... to grow stronger?"

Sunny grinned.

"Of course, I do. But these won't do me much good right now. It's no secret that you are the main fighting force of our group."

He sighed.

"The stronger you are, the better our chances of survival will get. Plus, it's not a gift. It's a trade."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"A… trade? What do you want?"

Sunny deliberated for a few seconds before answering.

"It's rather simple. I will give you these soul shards, and all other soul shards I earn on the way to that castle…"

Then, he looked her in the eyes and said:

"In return, you will teach me how to fight."

Chapter-42: Essence of Combat

Nephis looked at him and contemplated. This time, she remained silent longer than usual.

Sunny felt a bit nervous under her gaze, knowing that he was being evaluated. With Changing Star's skill and insight, it wasn't hard to imagine just how much she had gleaned from his battle performance. Both his current level and future potential must have been pretty much laid bare in front of her. Were they enough to make teaching him worth her while?

After some time, she took the soul shards and nodded.

"Okay."

Sunny smiled, congratulating himself on a successful deal. Not only did he receive a lot while not losing much, but he had also managed to create a bit of a favorable impression of himself in the eyes of Nephis and Cassie. As far as performances went, this was a great one.

"So when do we start?"

Nephis shrugged.

"Now."

Now?

Sunny glanced at the sun, which was already almost gone. Were they going to train in complete darkness? It wasn't really an obstacle for him. Changing Star, however…

"We will start with some words. That will be enough for today."

After hesitating a little, she added:

"Cassie, you listen too."

Sunny and Cassia turned to Nephis, listening to her like two obedient students. Despite the fact that their age was more or less similar, both knew that, in terms of martial prowess, their companion had authority that was as beyond theirs as a dragon's might was beyond that of a worm.

Nephis thought for a while and then said:

"Mastery of combat can be divided into two aspects. One is body, and the other one is mind. Training the body is not easy, but it is rather simple. All you need is repetition and experience. In a fight, things happen too fast to consider every detail in the moment. That's why your technique must exist in your muscles and bones, so much so that it almost becomes an instinct."

She paused.

"You can achieve initial results through repetition. Then, it must be cemented through experience. The more battle experience you have, the deeper a technique will be assimilated into your body. There is no other way. A thousand hours of training won't be as impactful as one real fight. Only those who survive countless battles can be truly in command of the body."

That simultaneously made a lot of sense and no sense at all. On the one hand, the principle of improving through practice was quite logical. On the other hand, Changing Star's statement made it seem like all those lofty Legacies with their years of training were nothing but harmless children. After all, no matter how good their tutors were, they had no real battle experience.

But then again, she did wipe the floor with every one of them — excluding Caster — with no apparent difficulty. So maybe her statement was true. That, however, posed a question of its own… just what kind of life had Nephis led to possess rich battle experience at the tender age of eighteen?

'Should I stop calling her "princess"?'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"Training the mind, however, is not simple at all. That is because, once you reach a certain level of skill, the mind is where the true combat takes place. The outcome is often decided before your body begins to move. And to master the mind, the first step is to understand the essence of combat. However, very few people truly do."

She looked at them and asked:

"What do you think that essence is?"

Sunny hesitated. The… essence of combat? What might it be?

If it was some other Legacy, he would have been tempted to say something stupid like "honor", "valor" or "duty". But he already knew that Nephis did not fit into the image of a noble aristocrat he had in his mind. She wasn't someone who followed empty words.

After a minute or so, Cassie finally answered:

"Victory."

And almost at the same time, Sunny said:

"Survival."

Changing Star shook her head.

"No."

Then she rubbed her neck and pierced them with a cold, fierce gaze.

"The essence of combat is murder."

Cassie flinched and opened her eyes wide. Sunny frowned a little. Nephis, however, did not seem to care. In the same calm tone, she continued:

"At the core of it, there is only this: you are trying to kill your opponent, and they are trying to kill you. In the end, one of you will be killed, and the other one will be the killer. Everything else is just noise."

Her words sank deep into Sunny's heart and reverberated there, causing something inside of him to resonate and awaken.

"Style doesn't matter. Weapons don't matter. Reason and intent do not matter. The only thing that matters is to be the last one standing. In this way, anything you do in combat must be viewed as only serving one of two purposes: either to kill your enemy or to prevent the enemy from killing you."

Nephis lowered her eyes.

"If you can understand that, you will have enough clarity to master the mind."

***

After that, Sunny couldn't fall asleep for a long while. He lay on the cold stone, looking into the darkness and thinking about what Nephis had taught them.

'Repetition, experience, clarity.'

These were the three keys to becoming a fearsome warrior. All three were important, but the last one was the most vexing.

Was it really how Changing Star had said? Was there nothing at the core of being a warrior than a cold will to kill? Intuitively, he felt that it was indeed so. This ruthless truth was, in a sense, an amalgamation of all his life experiences.

After all, for someone like him, life was nothing but a constant battle for survival. Someone always won, and someone always lost. The former got to live for a few more days, the latter… no one cared what happened to them.

Of course, life was life, and combat was combat. To most people, they weren't one and the same. But what about the Awakened? The sole purpose of their existence was to fight against the Nightmare Creatures. Very few could escape that fate.

After coming to the Academy, Sunny allowed himself to think that he had escaped the fate of always having to struggle at the edge of survival. But now, it seemed like he had just exchanged one battle for another.

This was an uncomfortable thought.

However, if he looked at it from a different perspective… did it actually mean that he always had a crucial advantage? Most of those chosen by the Spell were forced to somehow adjust to this merciless way of life. But he had always lived like this.

Was he actually one of the few perfectly suited to be an Awakened?

With this thought, Sunny fell asleep.

… In the early morning, he was awakened by a piercing scream.

Chapter-43: Repetition

Sunny was on his feet even before fully waking up. Somehow, Azure Blade was already in his hand. His shadow was hovering beside him, ready to either wrap itself around the sword in case he needed to attack or around his body, in case it was already too late for that.

He tried to understand what was going on. Nephis was nearby, her longsword raised in a defensive stance. Cassie…

'Where's Cassie?'

Fearing what he might see — giant tentacles reaching for them from the darkness — he looked around. The eastern horizon was just beginning to show the first hints of dawn, adding a tiny shade of grey to the blackness of the world. In that blackness, there were no signs of danger.

Finally, he saw Cassie.

The blind girl was stumbling at the edge of the platform with a horrified expression on her face. With her blond hair in a mess, she was stretching her hands out, clearly lost in space. Of course, there were no walls for her to find. The platform was opened to the elements, and the only thing waiting for Cassie was a plunge into the dark, tumultuous waters…

Before Sunny knew what he was doing, he was already running. That wasn't a very smart thing to do — after all, he did not know what had caused Cassia to scream and if there was some hidden danger nearby. Plus, it was still too dark for Nephis to see. His sudden lunge could have caused her to lash out with the sword before asking questions…

All of these were good reasons to wait and observe first, but in an uncharacteristic and completely irrational manner, Sunny acted before thinking.

He caught Cassie moments before she took a step off the platform and, holding her tightly in his arms, dragged the blind girl back.

"I got her!" Sunny yelled, letting Changing Star know that there was no need to stab him with a sword.

And then, in a quiet voice, he said to Cassie:

"I got you. It's alright. Everything is fine. Calm down…"

He felt the girl's body trembling and looked around again, trying to understand what had scared her so much. But there was nothing.

Nephis was listening to the sea for the same reason. After a few seconds, she asked:

"Do you see anything?"

Sunny helplessly shook his head.

"No."

He helped Cassie sit down in the center of the platform. While Nephis stood guard above them, he looked the blind girl over to make sure that there were no wounds on her body. Everything seemed to be fine.

"She's not hurt anywhere."

Changing Star looked down. Although her face remained indifferent, he could tell that she was a bit flustered. After a second or two, she asked in something that might have been her version of a calming tone. It sounded pretty much exactly the same as usual:

"Cassie? What happened?"

Magically, that did seem to calm the blind girl down a little. At least enough for her to speak in a quivering voice.

Cassie extended one hand and pointed down.

"Th—the head… I saw… oh gods!"

Sunny frowned and looked at Nephis.

"Did she see a vision? The past?"

The tall girl was silent for a moment.

"I don't know. It never happened before."

Both of them turned to Cassie, not sure what to do.

Since there was no apparent danger around, they took turns trying to calm the horrified girl down. However, after that one sentence, she fell quiet and refused to speak again. Nothing seemed to help.

After a while, Nephis sighed.

"Let's… leave her be, for now. Maybe she needs time."

Sunny was about to retort, but, truth be told, he didn't have any ideas either. In the end, he just nodded.

"Okay. I'll keep an eye on her."

Changing Star, however, had other ideas.

***

As the sun was rising and the surging sea was receding, Nephis chose to give Cassie some space and led Sunny to the edge of the platform. However, she made sure to always have the blind girl in the periphery of her vision.

Cassia sat hugging her knees. Her eyes were closed, but small tremors that periodically ran through her body betrayed that she was awake.

Sunny's eye twitched.

"Are you sure it's okay to leave her like this?"

Nephis gave him a complicated look.

"Yes."

Then, after some thought, she added:

"Cassie is strong."

Sunny wasn't sure how to answer. If Changing Star considered someone to be strong, then they most likely were. However, "strong" was the last word that came to his mind

when he thought about the delicate, beautiful, blind girl. Wasn't she someone who constantly needed their help?

But then again, there were different kinds of strength. Cassia was still alive and sane despite her debilitating Flaw. How many people could have done the same?

"If you say so."

Then, Nephis made him summon the Azure Blade. After studying it for a while, she nodded and took her longsword out of the air.

Despite its size, it was an elegant weapon. The narrow, double-edged blade was much longer than that of the Azure Blade, with an incredibly sharp, symmetrical tip. The whole blade, as well as the simple cross-shaped guard and the pommel, seemed to be made out of silver and reflected the pale morning light. The handle was tightly wrapped in black leather.

Putting the two swords side by side, Nephis spoke:

"Your sword can be used with one hand, but its true potential can only be revealed when held in both. It is created primarily for cutting and severing, hence the higher center of gravity. However, it can thrust as well."

Then she gestured to hers:

"My sword is a bit more versatile. It is created for both cutting and thrusting, and it has a double edge. However, the principle of wielding these two swords is effectively is the same."

She took the sword in both hands, placing one near the guard and another near the pommel. Then, she performed a downward slash.

"They are both leverage-based weapons. When held with two hands, one hand pushes," she pushed the sword down with the hand near the guard. "While the other hand pulls."

The hand near the pommel simultaneously pulled the handle up, giving the blade a tremendous boost in speed.

"This is how you generate force and perform powerful strikes. Now, your turn."

Sunny looked at his sword and gripped it with both hands, mimicking Nephis's pose. Then, he raised it and slashed down, making sure to enhance the force of the strike with

his lower hand.

Changing Star observed him.

"You need to understand that a strike doesn't come from the hands. It comes from your whole body. Power comes from your feet, your hips, your core, your shoulders, and is only then transmitted to your hands. Like this."

She demonstrated the downward slash again. This time, Sunny paid attention to the overall stance and movements of every part of Changing Star's body, as opposed to only the sword.

He wasn't a novice to fighting: instinctively, he already knew how to deliver a proper punch… even if, before, there wasn't a lot of strength in his body. The principles of striking with a sword were largely the same, so Sunny quickly understood the overall concept.

He performed the simple downward slash a few more times. After each time, Nephis gave him pointers and corrected his mistakes. Some time later, she was finally satisfied with his form.

"Good."

Sunny smiled, proud of his achievements.

Nephis looked at him thoughtfully and nodded.

"Now, do it a thousand more times."

The smile froze on Sunny's face.

'A… thousand? Did she say a thousand?!'

He blinked.

"Uh… sorry. How many times?"

Changing Star tilted her head and thought for some time.

"Well… we don't have much time today. So, yes. Only a thousand."

'Ha. Ha-ha. "Only" a thousand, eh?'

Sunny forced himself to sound polite.

"I see. Alright."

As Nephis walked back to sit with Cassie, he turned to the sea and raised his sword.

'One'.

The Azure Blade whistled as it cut the air. He raised it again.

'Two.'

Push and pull. This is how you generate force.

'Three.'

Strike with your whole body, not just your hands.

'Four.'

As Sunny raised his sword and slashed down, over and over again, only one thought eventually remained in his mind:

'Repetition, experience, clarity. Repetition…'

By the time he was done performing a thousand strikes, Cassie was finally ready to speak.

Chapter-44: Cassie's Dream

With pretty much every muscle in his body sore, Sunny walked over to the girls and fell on the ground. After catching his breath, he looked at Cassia.

"Cassie? Do you feel better?"

Several seconds later, the blind girl slowly nodded.

'That's a relief.'

He shifted and hesitated for a bit. Cassia didn't look too well. Her face was still very pale, with a distant, dazed expression on it. Her body at least was no longer trembling. Sunny wasn't very good at talking to people, let alone placating them. He wasn't sure what to say.

He cast a gaze at Nephis and sighed inwardly. Who knew that one day he would turn out to be the most sociable person for as far as the eye could see? What a joke…

"Can I have some water?"

Cassie turned to him and scowled, as though confused by the question. Then, she suddenly gasped and opened her eyes wide.

"Oh! Oh, sorry. Yes, of course…"

She summoned the limitless water bottle and offered it to Sunny. He took it with a grateful smile and greedily drank a few gulps before giving the bottle to Nephis. Eventually, it returned to Cassie.

"You drink some too."

After she did, he awkwardly patted the blind girl on the shoulder.

"Everything seems to be fine now. Uh… did you dream of another vision? You can tell us. If you want."

Cassie hesitated for a bit before saying:

"I… don't know. Maybe it was just a nightmare."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged glances. They both doubted that what Cassie saw was a simple nightmare. After all, people usually did not dream in the Dream Realm. The blind girl, meanwhile, continued:

"I don't really remember. It's all in fragments."

Sunny carefully considered his words, not wanting to pressure Cassie too much.

"You can just tell us what you remember. Maybe we'll be able to make sense of it together."

Cassia sighed and tentatively nodded. After a long pause, she finally found the courage to speak:

"At first, I saw a… a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Something vast was churning in the darkness. I felt like if I directly saw it, I would lose my mind. As I watched, terrified, the seals broke one after another, until only one remained. And then that seal broke, too."

She trembled a little.

"After that… I don't know. It was as though my mind shattered into a thousand shards, each shard reflecting its own image. Most of them were dark and scary. Some I have already forgotten. The other…"

Cassie fell silent, remembering.

"I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows."

Finally, she looked up, her face full of horror.

"In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks. And at the top, a… a dying angel was being consumed by

hungry shadows. When I saw the angel bleed, I suddenly felt as though… as though something so precious that it can't be described with words was taken from me."

Her voice became quieter.

"Then, I felt so much sorrow, pain and rage that what little remained of my sanity seemed to disappear. That was when I woke up… I think."

Nephis and Sunny remained silent for a while, trying to make sense of what Cassie had told them. Even if Nephis had an idea, she didn't show it. Sunny, however, was totally lost. He couldn't even begin to decipher the hidden meaning behind the vision… if it even was one.

Previously, Cassia's vision about the castle was pretty much straightforward. It showed her a human fortress and even the direction in which it was situated. This time, however, her dream was disjointed, full of weird symbolism and vague, uncertain images, much more like a charlatan's prophecy than a vision gained through an Aspect Ability.

Finally, he sighed.

"Maybe it actually was just a nightmare. Your previous visions weren't like this, right?"

Cassie silently shook her head.

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Well… people don't usually dream in the Dream Realm, but you do. Perhaps seeing a random nightmare once in a while is a side effect of your ability."

The blind girl turned to him, a faint relief written on her face.

"You really think so?"

He hesitated, trying to find the right words.

"Why not? It's a possibility."

Inwardly, however, he felt uneasy.

'A dying angel being consumed by shadows… why does it sound so ominous? I should try and stay away from angels in the future. Gee, what has become of my life. A sentence like that doesn't even sound insane anymore…'

With that, they were finally ready to welcome a new day.

***

Some time later, they were sitting on the western edge of the stone platform, looking at the scavengers below. Sunny's shadow was busy scouting a path to the next high landmark.

"Were there always that many?"

Sunny glanced at Nephis and shook his head.

"No, there were much more. They seem to be almost done with the carcass. I doubt it will last until nightfall."

Which meant that, by tomorrow, all these beasts would be roaming the labyrinth, making it hard for the three Sleepers to make any progress. It would be best to leave today and put some distance between themselves and the horde before the scavengers were done with their feast.

However, without scouting a path in advance, there was a chance of not making it to safety in time. Both options were risky.

Nephis frowned, seemingly thinking the same.

After a while, she said:

"I don't want Cassie to spend another night near this statue. Let's leave now."

Sunny thought for a while, then opened his mouth to offer his own opinion. However, a sudden commotion below prevented him from speaking.

Down at the bottom of the disappearing sea, amidst mounds of broken coral, the carcass of the giant shark-like monster — the remaining half of it, to be precise — was almost stripped of meat. And between its white bones, something was shimmering in the mud.

Two extremely large, luminescent crystals.

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Are those…"

"Yes. Shards of two transcendent soul cores."

Transcendent… two of them…

Suddenly, he was simultaneously filled with greed and fear. Greed because of how rare and precious transcendent soul shards were; fear because the giant shark turned to a be a corrupted devil, at least.

One corrupted devil, if not stopped by a Saint or a large number of Awakened, could potentially destroy an entire city. Sunny belatedly realized that he was much closer to death on that first night than he had previously thought.

"Should we…"

"Wait and listen."

He stared at Nephis and then obediently listened to the distant, barely audible clamor of the scavengers.

After a while, he noticed some disharmony in it.

Nephis suddenly tensed up.

"There."

She pointed in the direction of the labyrinth. After concentrating on it, Sunny was finally able to notice two massive shadows stepping out of a particularly wide passage.

A second later, the creatures casting those shadows appeared in sight. Sunny gulped.

'Damn.'

The monsters looked like the scavengers, but not quite. To start with, they were much larger, towering above the surroundings at more than three meters of height. Their carapace seemed to be thicker. It was colored in deep black and scarlet, like an ancient armor drenched in blood. Here and there, vicious-looking spikes were growing out of the carapace, making their every move much more dangerous.

Additionally, instead of heavy pincers, their upper arms ended with long, curved, terrifying bone scythes.

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his spine.

"What the hell are those things?"

Nephis tilted her head.

"Monsters, I guess."

Nightmare Creatures with one soul core were called "beasts". They were dangerous and strong, but mindless. If they were able to develop or were created with a second core, they became "monsters". Monsters were much more devastating and possessed some rudimentary, warped form of intelligence. They were the next step in a Nightmare Beast's evolution.

And these two seemed to be bigger, deadlier versions of carapace scavengers.

Sunny and Nephis watched as the two monsters approached the carcass. The scavengers were visibly afraid of them, rushing to get out of the way. Those who were too slow were mercilessly thrown to the side or cut apart by the bone scythes. Rivers of azure blood were flowing into the mud.

'What are they doing? Did they come to absorb the soul shards?'

Finally, the monsters reached the carcass. Each of them took one of the shards. However, instead of absorbing them, they simply turned around and carried the precious crystals away. The scavengers made way, following the shards with their little, hungry eyes.

Sunny blinked and looked at Nephis.

"Do we still leave now?"

Changing Star frowned and hesitated. A few moments later, she shook her head.

"No. We'll go tomorrow."

Then, she turned west and observed the retreating monsters.

"...Get your shadow to follow these two back."

Chapter-45: Sound of Laughter

Because of the shadow fragments Sunny had absorbed in the last few days, the range of Shadow Control has increased a little. However, it was still far from being enough to explore deep into the labyrinth. He only got the general direction in which the two large monsters were moving.

They were going west.

After telling this to Nephis, there was pretty much nothing else for him to do. In the end, Sunny decided to simply rest — the next day was promising to be full of hardships and danger, so it was in his best interest to let his body recover as much as it could.

Some time later, Sunny was lying on his back, staring at the grey sky. Cassie was sitting beside him, lost in her thoughts. Nephis was meditating. At least, that's what it looked like: she might as well had been asleep, for all Sunny knew.

After a while, Cassie turned to him.

"Sunny?"

He tilted his head to look at her.

"Yeah?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"Do you… do you think we'll be able to return home?"

Sunny glanced at her and furrowed his brow. A few seconds later, he turned away and looked at the sky again.

"Sure."

Cassie smiled:

"You really think so? Why?"

'What's with all these questions?'

He sighed and tried to find the right words.

"Because of her."

He pointed at Nephis, knowing that Cassie won't see it. There was no one else on the stone platform, though, so it was pretty obvious who he was referring to.

"I'm also not someone to die easily. In fact, I'm willing to bet that you couldn't have found a better duo of Sleepers to escort you across the Dream Realm. If anyone can survive this, it's us. So, yeah. I think that our chances of making it back are pretty high."

Cassie suddenly giggled.

"Aren't you a little too full of yourself? You were in the second to last place!"

Sunny shrugged.

"That's only because someone smart told me to keep a low profile. Otherwise, I would have ranked higher."

Then, with a grin, he added:

"Much higher! Third to last, at least!"

The blind girl couldn't help but laugh. The melodic sound of her laughter made Sunny feel much better — he had not heard anything like that ever since coming to the Dream Realm. It was nice to see that people were still able to preserve a bit of mirth even in this hellish place.

Come to think of it, this was the first time he heard Cassie laugh at all. Back in the Academy, she was always dull and bleak.

After this sudden outburst, Cassia's expression slowly turned wistful. A few seconds later, she asked:

"What do you miss the most about home?"

Sunny tried to think of something, but failed. He wasn't sure that he even had a home in the real world — the tiny room he had been renting previously was nothing but a

temporary shelter from the rain. As for the real world as a whole, his life there wasn't that pleasant either.

Finally, he said:

"I don't particularly miss anything."

Cassie was very surprised.

"Really? Don't you miss your family?"

Sunny smiled.

"I don't have a family. Well… I guess I have a sister somewhere. But we haven't seen each other in many years."

"Oh."

The blind girl fell silent. Several seconds later, she said quietly:

"I miss my family the most."

There was longing and sadness in her voice. Sunny didn't know what to say, so he stayed silent.

"Mom and dad must be really worried about me right now. No… no, actually, they wouldn't be worried. They would be heartbroken. They must think that I'm as well as dead already."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"You seem to care about them a lot."

Cassie turned to him in confusion.

"Of course. Isn't it normal?"

Sunny stared at the grey sky. The wind smelled of rain.

After a while, he said:

"I wouldn't know."

***

In the evening, Nephis made Sunny perform the thousand strikes again. After that, they ate the last strips of dried scavenger meat and took turns sleeping, so that one of them could always keep an eye on Cassie.

Thankfully, nothing happened during the night.

When the morning came and the dark sea retreated, they prepared to leave the giant statue. Nephis was the first one to climb down. Before that, she had a few words to say:

"Today will be different from before. There will be much more scavengers roaming in the labyrinth. We might not be able to create an ambush or avoid fighting several of them at once."

She looked at Sunny:

"If anything happens, your job is to bring Cassie away. We can retreat by using passages that are too narrow for the scavengers. If we get separated, proceed to the high point by yourselves. Don't wait for me. Do you understand?"

With a somber expression, he gave her a nod. Nephis returned it.

"Good. Time is of the essence, so let's go."

With that, she began the descent. After Nephis reached a point twenty or so meters below them, she found purchase and waited. Using the golden rope, Sunny lowered Cassie down. Just like while climbing up, they took turns helping the blind girl. Luckily, climbing down the statue was much easier.

Soon, they reached the ground.

Entering the labyrinth, the trio moved forward with haste. The shadow was ahead of them, scouting for monsters and optimal paths. Despite that, their progress was slow and chaotic. They had to constantly change direction to avoid groups of scavengers, often ending up in dead ends or moving further away from their destination.

Sunny, who played the role of the scout and navigator, felt his brains slowly starting to boil.

At some point, however, they inevitably ended up in a situation where a fight was unavoidable.

There was a large group of scavengers at their heels, and a pair of them blocking the path ahead. Neither of the two groups had noticed the Sleepers yet; however, since there were no other passages to turn into, it was only a matter of time.

Nephis considered their options for a few seconds. There was a scowl on her face. Finally, she said:

"If there's only two, we can take them."

Sunny looked at her with uncertainty in his eyes.

"But there's no time to set up an ambush."

He wasn't quite sure how they could fight two scavengers at once. Despite how good of a teacher Nephis was, he only practiced with the sword for a day. Facing against a scavenger alone was risky.

Changing Star shrugged.

"It's almost the same. I'll attack first. You follow behind in the shadows and finish one off once they turn. Then, we kill the second one together."

The whole plan was based on the assumption that Nephis could survive under the onslaught of two scavengers, both attacking her simultaneously. Sunny was very impressed by her prowess, but he wasn't sure that it was possible. There was a large probability that Nephis would die.

He still remembered that she wasn't present in Cassie's first vision.

But what else could they do?

A bit rattled, Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Alright."

After a short pause, Nephis summoned her sword.

Then, she stepped forward.

Chapter-46: Experience

After finding a good hiding spot for Cassie, Sunny and Nephis proceeded forward to face the scavengers. Soon, they saw two hulking silhouettes in the distance.

With her lips pursed together, Nephis threw over her shoulder:

"Keep up."

Then, like a runner preparing for a race, she got down on one knee, inhaled deeply… and lunged forward.

'Damn!'

Sunny dove into the deep shadow cast by the wall of the labyrinth and followed, running as fast as he could. However, the distance between them kept growing.

Suddenly, he remembered walking behind Nephis as they crossed the bridge to the Academy. Was it his fate to always follow behind her?

Changing Star's running speed was incredibly fast. She was practically flying through the air, like an arrow let loose from a bow. One of her arms was stretched backward, holding the sword with its point to the ground. The other was cutting the air with each stride.

It took the two scavengers a couple of seconds to realize what was happening after noticing her. By that time, she was almost upon them.

With madness burning in their eyes and viscous saliva dripping from their mandibles, the monsters screeched and charged forward. Nephis did not slow down, as though planning to ram them with her body. Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

Four terrifying pincers shot through the air.

At the last moment, Nephis fell backward, falling on her side. The inertia carried her forward as she slid through the mud, passing between the scavengers. Then, she twisted

her body and stopped herself by plunging the sword into the ground.

A bit slower, and she would have been impaled by one of the scavengers' legs.

'Crazy! She's crazy!'

By the time Changing Star got back to her feet, one of the scavengers had already turned around. However, Sunny couldn't see what was going on as his sight was blocked by the bulky carapace creatures. He only heard the sound of chitin striking against steel.

There was no time to worry about that anyway, since he had his own problems to solve.

Due to the insane maneuver that Nephis had pulled off, the second scavenger lagged a little behind the first one. It was just about to turn around when Sunny finally got close enough to launch an attack.

Silently cursing, he ran up a narrow protrusion on the coral wall and jumped, aiming to pierce the weak point at the scavenger's back from above. His shadow was already wrapped around the Azure Blade.

But at the last moment, the scavenger suddenly moved, slightly turning its torso to the right. The blade missed the concave spot where the armor plates connected and instead hit one of them square in the center, sliding helplessly across adamantine chitin.

'Crap!'

Instead of killing the beast with one decisive blow, Sunny ended up dealing no damage at all. What's worse, he landed right on top of the scavenger, practically hugging it from behind. In the next moment, the scavenger shook its carapace, throwing the irritating human off.

Sunny flew sideways and crashed into the labyrinth wall, feeling breath being knocked out of him. Suffocating and disoriented, he fell gracelessly into the mud.

'Not good.'

By some instinct, Sunny rolled to the side. Something tore past him and hit the wall, sending pieces of crimson coral flying through the air. Then, he was lifted into the air and thrown backward.

But by that time, however, he had already come to his senses.

Twisting his body, Sunny managed to land on his feet and take a few steps back without falling. In the next second, his sword was in front of him, held in both hands just like Nephis had taught him.

The scavenger was already charging at him with a menacing fire burning in its eyes.

'Repetition. Experience…'

The shadow flowed from the Azure Blade to his hand, then spread to his arm, shoulder, and then finally covered his whole body. Sunny instantly felt stronger, faster, more resilient.

But was it enough? No. To survive, he would definitely also need some luck.

One pincer flew at him from the right, the other from the left. There was no time to retreat or dodge sideways. So, instead, Sunny did something that made every instinct in his body scream in protest.

He jumped forward, closing the distance to the charging monster. The pincers clashed together with a loud crack behind his back.

Instinct or not, it was the only logical step. After all, the attack range of his sword was much shorter than that of the scavenger. He could only fight back by getting close.

Before the beast had time to react, Sunny did what he had recently done thousands of times. His muscles moved even before his mind gave the command.

With one fluid motion, he raised the sword over his head and slashed downward, pushing with one hand while pulling with the other. His whole body moved in concert to deliver a powerful blow.

The Azure Blade whistled as it cut the air. Then, it hit the joint of one of the scavenger's front legs and cleaved right through it, severing the limb entirely. Blue blood sprayed everywhere.

Sunny had less than a second to be amazed.

'I actually did it?'

But there was no time to be distracted. Due to the loss of its front leg, the scavenger lost balance for a moment, careening forward and down. However, he had seven other legs. This wasn't going to last long.

Coincidentally, though, at this exact moment, his other front leg slid in the mud, bringing the monster even further down.

Sunny did not waste this chance.

Taking a step forward, he thrust the Azure Blade up, pushing it into the scavenger's mouth. A severed mandible fell to the ground as the monster impaled itself on the sword with its own weight.

The massive body of the Nightmare Creature convulsed before falling still.

It was dead.

Sunny slowly exhaled, only now feeling the pain in his chest and at the back of his head. He carefully touched it and grimaced. His hand came back wet with blood.

'At least I'm alive.'

[You have slain an awakened beast, Carapace Scavenger.]

[You shadow grows stronger.]

[You have…]

With no time to listen to the Spell, Sunny tugged on the sword to dislodge it from the monster's head and hurried to help Nephis.

However, it was too late.

The other scavenger was lying in the mud, clearly dead. His limbs were still twitching, indicating that the fatal blow was delivered just moments ago. It seemed like Nephis had managed to sever its spine by piercing the weak spot at the base of the beast's torso with her longsword.

He couldn't see the silver-haired girl behind the bulky carcass. As Sunny approached it, he heard the sound of rugged, strained breathing. Then a shaky voice came from behind the scavenger:

"D—don't… don't come any closer."

In the deathly silence of the battle's aftermath, Changing Star's voice sounded strange and subdued. Sunny suddenly felt as though someone had squeezed his heart in a fist. Steeling himself, he took another step forward.

Nephis was standing in front of the dead scavenger, trying to catch her breath after the intense fight. There was a bloody gash on her shoulder. However, it didn't look life-threatening.

Sunny's attention, though, was instantly drawn to something else.

It seemed that at some point during the fight, the tall girl's makeshift seaweed top came apart, leaving her naked above the waist. She was covering her chest with one arm. Behind the arm, squished, the supple fullness of her…

Sunny flinched as though someone had stung him and hurriedly turned around. His face was burning. Without thinking about it, he even made his shadow look away.

An awkward silence followed. After some time, Sunny forced himself to speak:

"Are... are you alright?"

Nephis was slow to answer.

"Yes."

"Good. Uh… good. I'll… uh… I'll go fetch Cassie then."

"... Alright."

Feeling as though an army of monsters was chasing him, he walked forward on stiff legs and then quickened his step, barely holding himself from running.

'Her fault! It's her fault! She should have communicated things clearer!'

Trying to get the vivid image out of his head, Sunny hurried to the place where Cassie was waiting for them.

By the time they returned, Nephis had already fixed her top and was wearing it as though nothing had happened. However, Sunny couldn't help but feel that the look she gave him was somewhat weird.

'Forget it!'

After checking the wound on his head, Changing Star said.

"It's just a bleeder, nothing serious. Tell me if you feel dizzy and nauseous or have a strong headache, though."

Since Sunny had none of these symptoms, he kept quiet.

Nephis looked down at his clothes and sighed.

"Memory?"

He opened his mouth to say "no", but then fell silent.

Come to think of it, when he killed the scavenger, the Spell did say something else after informing him about the absorbed shadow fragments. At the time, he was too busy to pay it any attention.

"Let me check."

He summoned the runes and quickly found the cluster representing his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteers' Shroud], [Azure Blade].

'Hmm. Nothing new.'

Then what was the Spell talking about?

Suddenly, he noticed a new set of runes in the neighboring cluster. His eyes widened.

Echoes: [Carapace Scavenger].

Chapter-47: Echo

'Echo… it's an Echo…'

Sunny couldn't believe his eyes.

Echoes were an extremely rare type of reward that Awakened could receive after slaying Nightmare Creatures. Chances of getting one were very low. In the real world, an Echo could be sold for an unimaginable amount of money. That's because they were much more precious than Memories.

Without delaying it much further, he dove into his Sea of Soul. There, very few things had changed: a lonely black sun was still hanging above the calm, silent waters. It was orbited by spheres of light that represented his Memories. This time, there were three of them.

Just like before, Sunny couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was stealthily moving just beyond the periphery of his vision. However, this time, he didn't pay it any attention. He wanted to see his Echo.

It, too, was represented by a sphere of light. However, this sphere was much larger and hovered further away from the Shadow Core. With a thought, he commanded it to descend.

The sphere slowly floated down and touched the dark water. As Sunny came closer, walking on the surface of the sea, its radiance slowly faded away, revealing the monster contained within.

A hulking, menacing carapace scavenger was calmly standing in front of him. There was no madness in its eyes… or any feeling at all, for that matter. After all, it wasn't really alive. It was just an echo.

Shining runes appeared in the air around the scavenger.

Echo: [Carapace Scavenger].

Echo Type: Beast.

Echo Core: Awakened.

Echo Attributes: [Strong], [Armored].

Echo Description: [A cursed soldier of the fallen legion].

Before Sunny knew it, a wide grin appeared on his face. That scavenger was now his: it could be summoned and used to fight against his enemies, carry heavy cargo or perform other tasks. What's more, it was a whole rank above its master, which meant that it was much stronger, more resilient and fearsome than a Dreamer with a dormant core should normally possess.

With this Echo by their side, many things would become easier.

Following an impulse, Sunny raised a hand and brushed it against cold, black chitin. He just wanted to touch his new possession…

However, the moment his palm touched the scavenger, a strange thing happened. The Soul of Sea suddenly surged a little, and a new set of runes appeared:

[Transform Echo into a Shadow?]

Sunny flinched and snatched his hand back.

'What the hell is that about?'

He had never heard anything about transforming Echoes into something else, let alone "Shadows". Then again, he had never heard about Shadow Cores and fragments, too.

'It seems my Aspect holds more secrets than I thought.'

Sunny licked his lips and hesitated. Then, he cautiously said:

"Yes."

However, nothing happened. A moment later, the runes changed:

[Not enough Shadow Fragments to perform a transformation.]

[Shadow Fragments required: 24/100.]

He frowned, disappointed.

'I see. So there is another use for the fragments. They can either enhance my own core or do something weird to Echoes. How do I know which use is more beneficial without knowing what a transformation actually does?'

An Echo was plenty useful by itself. Sunny felt that it would be wiser to concentrate on strengthening himself, at least for now.

'I'll experiment with it later.'

With that, he left the Sea of Soul.

Since he had spaced out for quite a bit, Nephis was looking at him with a silent question in her eyes.

Sunny grinned:

"I got an Echo."

Her pupils slightly widened.

Cassie, on the other hand, was more expressive:

"An Echo? You actually got an Echo?!"

"Yes."

Since the larger group of monsters was now minutes away from catching up with them, Sunny didn't waste any time and summoned the Scavenger.

The hulking beast immediately appeared in front of him, seemingly sewn together from tiny sparks of light. Soon, its black chitin became fully corporeal. Following Sunny's command, it shifted a little and raised its mighty pincers.

Nephis observed the Echo with an unreadable expression. Then, a corner of her lip slightly curled up.

"Good."

Sunny looked at her with a smile.

"I think we can task it with carrying Cassie. Outside of battle, it will help us the most."

The blind girl's mouth fell open.

"Carry me? Like… like a mount?"

He chuckled and slapped the scavenger on its carapace.

"This bad boy can fit a petite girl like you with no problem at all. Trust me! I've been clambering these things a lot for the past few days. It's actually quite spacious on top of them. Especially if they're not trying to kill you."

Cassie hesitated.

"Well… okay. If you think it's for the best."

Sunny and Nephis helped the blind girl to climb on top of the Echo. Then, they used the golden rope to create makeshift reins for Cassie to hold onto.

After quickly retrieving soul shards from the dead scavengers, the Sleepers hastily left the passage, narrowly avoiding another battle.

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With Cassie riding comfortably atop the scavenger, their overall speed dramatically increased. Sunny and Nephis were jogging in the front, hoping to recoup the time lost in the first half of the day and reach the high point with an hour or two to spare.

From time to time, they had to take detours to avoid fighting groups of carapace monsters. However, with a monster of their own by their side, the mood and mental state of the three Sleepers were much better.

For the first time since coming to this place, Sunny felt somewhat calm.

Of course, this calmness didn't last long.

At some point, he noticed that the wind had picked up a bit. Almost simultaneously, Cassie asked them to stop.

Nephis and Sunny looked at her with deep frowns. It seemed that they both had a bad premonition.

"What is it?"

The blind girl let go of the reins.

"Do you hear anything?"

They looked at each other, then shook their heads.

"No. Why?"

Cassie scowled.

"Help me get off this thing."

After they helped her, she stood motionless for a while, listening. Her scowl deepened. Then the blind girl cautiously kneeled and put her ear to the ground.

"What do you hear?"

Cassie licked her lips.

"It's murmuring."

Suddenly, a drop of water fell on Sunny's face. He raised his head and looked at the sky.

There, dark stormy clouds were gathering with unnatural speed. Pretty soon, they were bound to cover it completely.

Including the sun.

And when that happened…

His eyes widened.

Chapter-48: The Storm

"We need to move, now."

As Nephis turned to him, Sunny grabbed Cassie and helped her stand up. His face was even paler than usual, and there was a panicked look in his eyes.

"Now! Help me get her back on the scavenger!"

The silver-haired girl raised her head and looked at the sky. Soon, her expression darkened. Without saying anything, she did as he had asked.

Cassie seemed a bit disoriented. She grabbed the reins and helplessly turned to her friend:

"Neph? What is going on?"

Changing Star glanced at her. When she eventually spoke, her voice sounded heavy.

"A storm is coming."

Meanwhile, Sunny sent his shadow to climb on top of a tall pillar of coral and looked ahead, trying to understand how far the cliffs they were aiming for were. From the look of it, there was still a considerable distance to go. However, the giant statue was already much further away.

Going back now would have been suicide.

He turned to Nephis:

"We're about three or four kilometers away from the cliffs. Do… do you think we can make it?"

She scowled.

"If we take the most direct route. Maybe."

Sunny hesitated, then asked:

"What about the monsters?"

Changing Star looked ahead and gritted her teeth.

"We'll have to cut through."

'That's it? That's the plan?'

As he was fruitlessly trying to come up with some devious trick to save them, Nephis turned her head and glanced at him, puzzled.

"What are you waiting for? Run!"

***

As they darted forward, heavy drops of rain were starting to fall on the ground. Strong winds were howling between the coral blades, sending bits of mud and seaweed flying. With storm clouds gathering in the sky, sunlight dimmed, and a cold twilight descended upon the labyrinth.

Sunny was running with all his might, as though his life depended on it — because it actually did. He was leading their small group, choosing the straightest path toward the cliffs with the help of his shadow. Nephis was a step behind him. The scavenger carrying Cassie was stomping through the mud with its eight legs in the back.

Without the need to avoid monsters and death breathing down their necks, they moved with amazing speed. Side passages and crimson walls were flashing past them in a blur. There was no need to hold back and conserve strength for the long run — if they were late to reach the cliffs by a minute, their lives would be over. They had to give it their all.

Sunny was ready to fight a series of bloody skirmishes all along the way, but, to his surprise, the inhabitants of the labyrinth did not give them much trouble. The scavengers seemed to be as panicked as they were. The bulky beasts were busy trying to hide inside the coral mounds or burrowing underground.

On the rare occasions when one of them showed aggression, a quick slash of the sword or a threatening clack of a pincer was enough to make the monster change its mind.

However, no matter how fast they were moving, the storm was faster. The rain quickly turned into a pelting downpour, each drop becoming a torrent. The winds grew in strength, striking against their bodies with enough force to make them stumble. The light dimmed even further, reducing visibility to almost zero.

Finally, a blinding bolt of lightning tore through the darkness, followed almost immediately by a deafening thunderclap.

In the next moment, the ground under Sunny's feet trembled, causing him to lose balance and fall. He rolled in the mud and tried to stand up, but slipped and fell again. Someone's arm grabbed him by the shoulder and helped him rise.

In the darkness of the storm, Sunny saw Changing Star's face. She opened her mouth and shouted:

"Don't stop! Run!"

He almost couldn't hear her behind the roaring wind and rain.

By the time Sunny began to move, the dark, salty water was already as high as his shins. He gritted his teeth.

The sea was coming back.

He couldn't determine where the water was coming from, but with each minute, it was rising higher. Soon, it was up to his knee, then up to his waist, making running almost impossible. The speed of the group slowed down considerably.

It was then, in a sudden flash of lightning, when they saw a dark mass of stone ahead.

They had made it to the cliffs.

Almost at the same time, a terrible rumbling sound came from the depths of the labyrinth. Turning back, Sunny saw a colossal, crushing torrent of black water rushing through the crimson forest. Some distance away, a tardy scavenger was caught by it and thrown against the coral walls. The unbreakable carapace of the mighty creature cracked and burst open like a rotten egg.

'Curses!'

He turned to Nephis:

"Time is up! Start climbing!'

She caught him by the arm.

"Dismiss your Echo!"

Sunny didn't know whether the scavenger could scale the cliff. In any case, Cassie wouldn't have been able to hold on if it did. He helped the blind girl get down and then sent the monster back to the Sea of Soul.

Nephis lowered herself to let Cassie climb on her back, then tied them together with the golden rope. Not wasting any time, she gritted her teeth and stepped forward to grab onto the wet rocks of the cliff wall.

They began the ascent, rushing to get as high as possible before the black torrent hit. Some time later, Sunny screamed:

"Brace!"

In the next moment, a wall of dark water hit the rocks mere meters beneath their feet. As Sunny held for dear life, the whole cliff shuddered. A few boulders fell from somewhere high above, missing his head only by chance.

Somehow, all three of them were still alive.

However, things were far from being over. The black water was still rising, now with frightening speed, threatening to swallow them at any second. They had to keep climbing, and they had to be faster than the surging sea.

Sunny cursed as he searched for the next hold to grab onto. To survive, he had to scale the face of the cliff with crazy speed. However, hastily climbing wet rocks was a recipe for disaster: one slip of a hand, and he would plunge down to be crushed against the cliffs, drown, or be eaten by some giant monster.

The torrential rain and hurricane wind made everything even worse.

And yet, there was no choice.

He frantically kept climbing, tearing his skin on sharp rocks. Every muscle in his body was in agony. If not for the shadow wrapped tightly around his body, Sunny would have been long dead. But even with its help, the surging dark water was getting closer and closer.

"Damn it! Damn it all!"

No matter how hard Sunny tried, he couldn't win back any distance. Soon, the water was at his feet. The sea slowly swallowed his legs, then his torso. He kept climbing, now fighting against the weight of the water and the force of the tide that was trying to tear him away from the cliff.

But it was useless in the end.

When the water covered his shoulders, he felt his finger slipping from the wet rocks. Sunny tried to hold on, but the current was too strong. He was pushed away like a weightless toy, losing any purchase…

'No!'

...In the last second, a golden rope fell into the water beside him. Shaken, Sunny grabbed onto it and held with all his strength. The rope drew tight and lifted him out of the water. His feet touched the cliff wall again.

Not wasting any time, he resumed climbing with the help of the rope. Finally, a strong hand grabbed him from above and dragged his body over the edge of the cliff.

Sunny fell to the ground, struggling to breathe. After some time, he looked at Nephis, who was lying in a similar position to his right, equally as drained. She was still clutching the golden rope in her hand. Cassie was sitting a few steps away from them.

He wanted to laugh, but had no strength for it.

They survived.

Chapter-49: Natural Element

For a few minutes, Sunny simply lay on the ground, letting the rain hit his face. From time to time, a bolt of lightning arced through the skies, drowning everything in blinding light. Other than that, it was almost completely dark. If not for his Attribute, he would have had trouble discerning the shapes of Nephis and Cassie, who were resting nearby.

After some time, however, a feeling of uneasiness entered his mind. Something was off. Sunny scowled, trying to understand where that feeling was coming from. Finally, he realized that it was his shadow. It was trying to draw his attention to something.

'Please, let me rest. I just want to rest.'

He was too tired to do anything. Both his body and mind were exhausted. However, the shadow was very persistent. It remained adamant.

In the end, Sunny moaned and rolled over on his stomach, then slowly stood up. Nephis turned her head and looked at him.

"What is it?"

He grimaced.

"I don't know yet. Something feels wrong."

Cassie shivered and got closer to Neph. Following his shadow's warning, Sunny looked around, trying to find any sign of danger in their surroundings.

Even with his vision, he couldn't see anything out of place. The upper part of the cliffs was well above the stormy sea, forming a small island. Its surface was rugged and uneven, with several protruding ridges breaking the line of sight. There was a large space between their group and the nearest ridge. That space was littered, seemingly at random, with piles of dirt and tall boulders.

Nephis got up and summoned her sword.

"Do you see anything?"

Sunny frowned.

"Not really…"

At that moment, another lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the small island. His eyes widened.

The tall boulders surrounding them were massive and irregularly shaped. They were black in color and motionless… that's why Sunny had not recognized them for what they were at first glance.

All around them, scavengers were silently lying on the ground.

Sunny froze, suddenly consumed by terror. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled and stood up on ends. One, two, three… he lost count because of panic and gritted his teeth. Seven… no, eight of them.

It seemed the three humans were not the only ones who thought of taking shelter from the dark sea on these cliffs. He trembled.

These cliffs were a death trap...

Noticing something on his face, Nephis tensed:

"Sunny?"

He slowly turned his head to her and whispered:

"Don't speak. Don't move. Just… stay where you are."

She followed his instructions without asking for the reason. However, a silent question appeared on her face.

Cassie did the same.

Sunny closed his eyes and breathed in, trying to calm his panicking mind down. There were no hopeless situations. Every problem had a solution. He just had to think of one…

The scavengers did not attack yet. Maybe they were asleep or patiently waiting out the storm, trying not to move in fear of attracting more terrifying monsters. Maybe they

simply did not notice the humans. After all, it was unknown how well these creatures could see. Were they able to see in the dark? Probably not, or at least not as well as he could.

There was still hope.

Sunny opened his eyes and looked at the small island again. But this time, his perspective was different. He saw the deep darkness, the clamor of the storm that drowned out most of the sounds, the large distance between the scavengers.

This was his territory. It was perfectly suited for a murderous shadow. Didn't he dream of becoming a silent assassin? Well, here was his chance. He just had to execute each step perfectly… crawl through the darkness, strike without alerting the enemy, kill each of them with one precise blow.

Rinse and repeat. He already knew their strengths and weaknesses — all that was left was to put that knowledge to practice. And even if he makes a mistake, there were other means to fall back onto. Echo and Nephis could do their part if he were to land himself in danger.

Yes, that could work. It had to.

Sunny looked at Changing Star and Cassie.

"I'll take care of this."

Before they could react, he seemed to dissolve into the shadows.

Under the cover of darkness, Sunny sneaked forward. His steps were soft and measured, his breathing controlled. He quickly determined the optimal order of attack to minimize the chance of being discovered and proceeded to the first target — a hulking scavenger that was the furthest away from the pack.

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny suddenly felt calm and focused. He felt as though he was finally in his natural element.

As the looming silhouette of the scavenger approached, he slowed down and circled around his target. The monster did not move, oblivious to the lurking threat that was drawing closer with each second. Sunny held his breath and prepared to attack.

He only had one chance.

'Do it right!'

With that thought, he silently lunged forward.

One step, two. Sunny jumped and easily landed on the monster's carapace. The Azure Blade was already in his hand, its steel dark. A moment later, it plunged into the weak point on the scavenger's back, piercing the chitin and destroying its brain. The quiet crack of the breaking carapace was quickly washed away by the rain.

It was done.

Sunny felt a sense of triumph appear in his heart and quickly suppressed it. This wasn't the right time to celebrate — seven targets were still waiting for him in the darkness.

He retrieved his sword and jumped down from the scavenger's corpse.

Then, Sunny frowned.

Why was the Spell silent?

It didn't announce his kill, nor the absorption of the shadow fragments.

Feeling his skin crawl, Sunny turned around and looked at the scavenger. At first, he was afraid that the beast was still alive… but that wasn't the case.

It was as dead as could be.

However, on closer inspection, Sunny noticed something that he had missed before.

And when he did, his face paled.

Chapter-50: Death Trap

The scavenger was dead. However, it wasn't Sunny's blade that killed it.

While circling the target, he was focused on staying unnoticed and not alerting the enemy to his presence before reaching the optimal position for an attack. After that, he only saw the monster's back.

That's why he didn't notice the terrible wound that ran from the top of the creature's torso to its segmented legs, obscured by the rain.

The unbreakable carapace was cut open like a tin can. The scavenger's flesh and mangled organs could be easily seen through the large gap, oozing azure blood. It streamed down only to be washed away by the storm.

Sunny gulped.

He might have felt awkward about performing a perfect ambush on a long-dead monster if not for the fear of whatever had killed it in the first place.

Looking around, he hesitated and summoned the Azure Blade back, then wrapped himself in the shadow.

The small island was silent except for the howling of the wind. The rain was still falling down, forming a constant veil that hid away all details and distant objects. A rare flash of lightning sometimes flooded this bleak world with stark whiteness. Then, a thunderclap would come, making the skies tremble.

With cold fright settling deep into his bones, Sunny cautiously moved to the next scavenger. He could tell from some distance that it was also dead, but had to come closer and make sure. Indeed, he was right: the creature was almost severed in half by the unknown assailant. Its wet innards were lying on the ground in a messy pile.

The darkness had long ago stopped being comforting, becoming terrifying and oppressive instead. Sunny shivered.

…By the time he checked on all eight monsters and confirmed that they were all dead, he was nauseous and scared out of his wits. When Sunny had first realized that the black shapes were, in fact, scavengers, he thought that the situation was as bad as it could get. Now, he wasn't sure anymore.

In fact, he was pretty convinced that things went from bad to worse.

Standing near the last scavenger, Sunny observed his surroundings and thought about returning to Neph and Cassie. Maybe the terrifying killer had already left the island. They could just hide and hope for the best. He wouldn't be alone, at least.

However, not knowing what kind of danger was hiding in the darkness would drive him insane long before the morning came. Plus, with his Fated attribute, "hoping for the best" was a fool's errand.

That's why, although his body was covered in cold sweat, Sunny gritted his teeth and slowly walked toward the ridge that was obscuring the rest of the island from him. Coming close, he started climbing, trying to be as quiet as possible.

The ridge wasn't very high, so he was able to scale it without much effort. Sticking close to the rocks, he raised his head and looked down.

Then, he immediately wanted to let go and fall to the ground.

Right beneath him, just a few meters away, a dark silhouette was outlined against the rocks. It was much larger than the scavengers, with jagged spikes growing out of its thick carapace. Its chitin was black and crimson, like an ancient armor splattered with fresh blood. Instead of pincers, two terrifying bone scythes were protruding from the joints of its arms.

Each one was long and sharp enough to split a scavenger in two.

Sunny froze, afraid to move. He even stopped breathing.

'So that's the killer.'

It was one of those monsters that they had seen retrieving the transcendent soul shards from the giant shark's carcass, or another of their kind. He remembered how the two creatures had cut through the horde of scavengers, killing or throwing aside any beast that got in their way. Slaughtering just seven of them would not pose a problem for something that deadly.

Not to mention getting rid of three Sleepers.

Careful not to make a sound, Sunny slowly lowered himself down. His whole body was trembling. Moving his arms and legs with utmost precision, he began climbing down from the ridge, praying not to be heard, sensed, or noticed in some other way.

Luckily, the monster remained oblivious to his presence.

Reaching the ground, Sunny took a few steps back, still facing the ridge. He had to force himself to turn around. Feeling as though his back was being pierced by invisible needles, the young man stealthily moved in the direction where he had left his companions.

A couple of minutes later, he returned to Nephis and Cassie. The girls were tense and nervous, waiting for his return in the darkness. Before coming out of the shadows, Sunny let them know that he was approaching.

"It's me."

Nephis moved, lowering her sword a little. Her face was a little grim.

"What is the situation?" she said, careful to keep her voice low.

Sunny slowly exhaled, finally feeling a bit safer. For the first time, he was genuinely happy not to be alone in this cursed place.

"There are eight scavengers around us. But they're all dead. The killer is one of those big monsters we saw, the thing with the crimson pattern on its carapace and scythes instead of pincers. It's hiding from the storm beneath a stone ridge not far from here."

A bolt of lightning flashed, illuminating everything around. In its aftermath, it looked as though two white sparks ignited in Changing Star's eyes. Soon, the reflection was gone, leaving them grey and inscrutable again.

She tilted her head and whispered, as though talking to herself.

"An awakened monster."

Sunny licked his lips.

"Yeah. So, what should we do?"

Nephis thought for a while, leaning on her sword. Then, she looked at him and said:

"Kill it."

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Sunny stared at her, lost for words. Finally, he collected himself and said the first thing that came to his mind…

"Are you nuts?"

The idea of fighting that thing was pretty ridiculous, if not completely insane. Realizing that his words might have sounded a bit rude, he cleared his throat and added:

"I mean… have you thought this through? How are we supposed to kill that monstrosity?"

Nephis slowly inhaled.

"It's not a question of thinking things through. We simply have no choice."

She glanced at Cassie, who was listening to them with a pale face, and explained:

"We can't leave the cliffs before morning, and neither can the monster. However, once the sun rises, it will easily see us and attack. Then, our only advantage — the element of surprise — will be gone. If we have to fight it anyway, it's better to be the ones initiating the fight."

Changing Star looked around and added:

"It's not completely dark yet. Although barely, I can still see. Once the night comes, this won't be the case. So we will have to attack it first, and do it soon."

Sunny shook his head.

"This still doesn't explain how we are going to kill it. That thing just dispatched eight scavengers like it was nothing. We are not its opponents. We don't even know its weaknesses!"

Nephis frowned. After a short pause, she said:

"It's just an awakened monster."

Sunny couldn't help but stare at her in disbelief.

"What do you mean, "just" an awakened monster? Have you forgotten that all three of us are only Sleepers?! Dormant humans are not supposed to be able to deal with awakened beasts, let alone monsters. The fact that we can reliably kill scavengers is already abnormal!"

She looked back at him, undisturbed, and simply answered:

"But we are abnormal."

Sunny stood there with his mouth open, not knowing what to say.

Nephis sighed.

"You and I both are not exactly ordinary Sleepers. Aren't we? Don't try and deny it. Someone ordinary simply would not have survived in this place."

He frowned, not happy about her line of thought. Meanwhile, Changing Star continued:

"You, me, plus the awakened beast you have as an Echo, plus the advantage of a surprise attack. I'm not saying that it will be easy. We might die. But there's a good chance that we won't."

She looked down, at the silvery blade of her sword, and added after a couple of seconds:

"In any case. As I have already said, we don't have a choice."

Sunny gritted his teeth, trying to find a logical retort. However, her reasoning seemed unassailable. He just had a really bad feeling about fighting that monster.

In the ensued silence, Cassie, who had been quiet all this time, suddenly spoke:

"You are forgetting about the main advantage we have over that thing."

Both of them looked at her, surprised.

The blind girl turned to face them and slightly lifted her head.

"We are intelligent, and the monster is not."

Her words echoed in the darkness. Sunny sighed.

It seemed that a fight with the bone scythe monster was inevitable.

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Some time later, he was standing in the darkness, looking at the terrifying creature in front of him. His expression was grim and somber. Tightly gripping the Azure Blade, Sunny slowly inhaled.

The ominous feeling he had before was still there, now stronger than ever.

'I don't like this.'

With this thought, he exhaled and raised his hand.

Chapter-51: Carapace Centurion

Monsters did possess some rudimentary intelligence, however, they could not compare to humans. At their core, they were still predators who acted mostly on instinct. Their cunning was beastly in nature and was not that hard to overcome. That gave the three Sleepers a chance to leverage their advantage.

After finalizing the plan, they made some preparations.

While Changing Star was getting ready, Sunny had retrieved the soul shards from the eight dead scavengers. After delivering them to the silver-haired girl, he watched as she brought them to her chest and crushed them in her fist one after another, absorbing the essence of each shard into her soul core.

After a few minutes, when the changes caused by the absorption were over, Nephis opened her eyes and slowly inhaled.

To a Sleeper, consuming the shards of eight awakened beasts was equivalent to slaying sixteen dormant creatures. While not tremendous, it was still a significant boost in physical ability. Her body had become stronger, faster, enhanced in every way.

They were going to need every bit of that strength to survive.

Because of how attuned Nephis was to her physicality, getting accustomed to her new limits did not take long. Very soon, she looked at him and asked:

"Are you ready?"

Sunny sighed and glanced at his shadow, hoping to get some moral support.

The shadow pretended to not notice and ignored him.

'Disloyal bastard!'

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Nephis nodded and turned to Cassie.

There was nothing really to say. They had already discussed everything there was to discuss, and empty words could not make the blind girl worry any less. Come to think of it, Sunny wouldn't have wanted to trade places with her, even though out of the three of them she was the only one who didn't have to risk her life in combat.

Facing the enemy, no matter how terrifying, was better than waiting powerlessly for the outcome, knowing that there's nothing you can do to change it. From that point of view, he was actually the lucky one.

Cassie tried to put on a brave face. She turned to Nephis and forced a smile:

"Go and kill that thing. Maybe you'll finally get something decent to wear and stop making me feel so guilty."

A corner of Changing Star's lip curled up.

"Okay."

After that, she turned to Sunny and returned to her usual serious self.

"Let's go."

… A few minutes later, he was standing on top of the rocky ridge, looking down at the deadly monster. The shadow was wrapped around his body, enhancing Sunny's physical abilities. Their plan was pretty solid and had a high chance of working.

However, he still couldn't get rid of the ominous feeling that this was not going to end well.

'I don't like this.'

With a sigh, Sunny raised his hand and summoned the silver bell.

Then, he lightly shook it, causing the clear melodic ringing to resound amidst the storm.

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Immediately, the monster below moved, turning its massive torso around and looking for the source of the sudden noise. As he saw Sunny, a mad crimson flame ignited in its eyes.

However, Sunny did not see any of this, because he was already facing the other way. As soon as the bell rang, he turned around and jumped down from the ridge without a second of hesitation.

The ridge wasn't very tall, but there was still a considerable distance to the ground. Sunny hit the rocks hard and rolled, trying to disperse the force of the impact. As soon as he got back to his feet, he ran, trying to get as far away as possible.

A moment later, the ridge exploded behind his back. The monster simply crashed into it with its hulking body, breaking through the layers of rocks as though they were paper. Simultaneously, there was a flash of lightning and a thunderclap, drowning the loud rumble of the falling debris.

The creature locked onto retreating Sunny and lunged forward, trying to pierce his body with one of its scythes. Shards of rock were flowing like a torrent from its spiked carapace.

Luckily, Sunny was already far enough. Without slowing down, he lowered his body, ran for several more meters, and then turned around.

The picture of the monster, who was more than three meters tall, rushing at him like a speeding train was enough to make any person falter. However, Sunny stood his ground, raising the Azure Blade above his head.

After all, he was the bait.

Half a dozen meters away from him, the monster finally reached their trap.

Almost unnoticeable in the darkness and the pouring rain, the golden rope was strung between two massive boulders at the height of the creature's leg joints. Earlier, Sunny had lowered his body to run beneath it.

Overwhelmed by bloodlust, the monster did not notice the tautly drawn rope and ran into it at full speed. If it was a normal rope, it would, without a doubt, immediately snap. However, the golden rope was a Memory, and being incredibly sturdy was one of its attributes.

The rocks it was tied to, unfortunately, were quite mundane. They shattered almost immediately.

But the damage was already done.

With its front legs suddenly jerked backward, the scythe slayer lost its balance and crashed into the ground face-first, sliding forward on wet stone and leaving behind a shallow trench. Sunny jumped away.

The monster was unperturbed. Almost immediately, two bone scythes pierced the ground, jerking its massive body to a stop. In the next moment, unexpectedly swift and nimble for its size, it was already beginning to rise.

If it was allowed to stand up, their fates would be sealed.

Fortunately, Sunny's Echo was faster.

The moment the monster fell, it stopped pretending to be one of the dead scavengers, got up and dashed forward. Just as their enemy was about to rise, it jumped on its carapace from behind, pinning the creature down with its weight, and locked its pincers on the creature's arms just beneath the point where the bone scythes began.

Despite the fact that the Echo was wounded by the spikes growing from the monster's carapace, it succeeded in immobilizing it, at least for a second.

A second was enough.

As though out of nowhere, Nephis, who was lying in ambush, appeared in front of the monster. Darting between its terrifying scythes, she leaned forward and delivered a devastating thrust with her longsword, putting her whole weight behind it.

They didn't know if the awakened monster had the same weak spot on its back as its lesser relatives, the scavengers, had. However, there was no reason to assume that there was no gap between its carapace and torso armor. It was a mechanical issue.

Anything that had to be flexible could not be too rigid.

The tip of Changing Star's sword plunged into the narrow gap. Then, the sword disappeared into the monster's body, penetrating so deep that its hilt ended up brushing against the chitin.

'Hell yes!' Sunny thought, triumphant.

However, in the next second, his expression dimmed.

Because the creature didn't even seem to notice the wound that was supposed to be if not fatal, then at least heavily debilitating. Straining its body a little, it suddenly twisted,

throwing the Echo off its carapace, and rose to its feet. The bone scythes scraped against the rock as it pulled them out from the ground.

Defenseless, Nephis was right in front of it, her sword still stuck in the monster's flesh.

'Oh no!'

Sunny was too far away to do anything, circling around the massive creature to attack it from behind. The Echo was on the ground, still reeling from being thrown off the enemy's back. It didn't seem like it could help either.

For the moment, Changing Star was on her own.

The scythes pierced the air, aiming for her flesh. At the last moment, however, a pair of pincers locked one of them into an iron grip. That gave Nephis another fraction of a second to react.

Letting go of the sword, she dove under the creature's body, hiding in the blind spot of the remaining scythe's attack range. As far as hiding places went, this one wasn't optimal, since all the monster had to do to crush her into a bloody pulp was to lie down. However, in that moment, Nephis had no other choice.

'This is bad, this bad...'

By then, Sunny was already behind the creature. Hoping to buy Neph some time, he brandished the Azure Blade and slashed down. The sword connected with the joint of one of the monster's rear legs, drawing azure blood. However, unlike how it was in the battle against a scavenger, he failed to completely sever the limb. It was too tough and thick.

In the next moment, the leg disappeared from Sunny's field of vision.

'Crap.'

As that thought appeared in his mind, Sunny raised his head and looked at the monster. Somehow, it had already turned around and was now facing him, two crimson flames burning with bloodlust in its eyes.

Before Sunny could properly react, the sharp tip of a bone scythe hit him in the chest with the force of a siege ram. The only thing he managed to do was to transfer the shadow from his body to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Because of this lightning-fast decision, the armor held. He wasn't pierced through the heart and impaled on the scythe.

However, it was a small consolation.

The force of the blow was still enough to make his ribcage cave in and send his body flying through the air like a rag doll.

… Somehow, Sunny found himself lying on the ground. His body felt weird, and he couldn't breathe. Something bitter was flowing from his mouth, making him choke.

It was blood. He was drowning in his own blood.

Weakly, Sunny tried to move, but his limbs wouldn't listen to him. Only the shadow listened, enveloping his body and delaying the inevitable a little.

'I'm hurt...'

With his thoughts moving slower and slower, as though submerged in a dense fog, he looked up, hoping to see the stars.

Instead, he saw two burning crimson eyes approaching him from the darkness.

Chapter-52: Clarity

In that moment, hovering on the edge of nothingness, Sunny realized that he was about to die.

He had to struggle against the fog that permeated his mind, slowing down his thoughts and dampening all emotions.

All except for fear.

Despite the fact that his body was broken and his mind was paralyzed, some stubborn part of Sunny was still refusing to give up. He wasn't ready to die. At least not without giving his all to survive.

He was revolted at the thought of giving the world the satisfaction of the win.

That would be so infuriating. Hadn't he told Hero that he was going to survive no matter what, to spite them all?

That's right. He might be a shameless liar, but a promise was still a promise.

But… how was he even supposed to survive? No matter how he looked at it, the situation seemed to be hopeless.

As the scythe slayer approached, its eyes shining menacingly with bloodthirsty crimson light, Sunny tried to pierce through the fog that enveloped his mind. However, his attempts were aimless and weak. It was hard to find purchase in the fog.

He needed an anchor.

Suddenly, a simple thought caught his attention. It was something that he had repeated a thousand times, burning it into his mind.

'Repetition, experience, clarity.'

Clarity…

He remembered what Nephis had taught him. The essence of combat was murder. Any action performed during a battle served only one of two purposes: it was either to kill your enemy or prevent the enemy from killing you.

If he could learn that, he would have enough clarity to master the mind.

Back then, he didn't really understand the profound meaning behind the simple word "clarity" that Nephis had used. But now, with his mind in shambles, he was finally able to grasp it.

The two truths behind the essence and purpose of combat were simple and solid, almost tangible. Even in his half-conscious state, he was able to use them as a stable foundation in the fog. Then, he reformed his mind around this foundation, building it along the stark lines of that truth.

Suddenly, he was able to think again.

What's more, his thoughts were clear and incredibly fast, free of all unnecessary distractions.

This was clarity.

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Sunny looked up at the advancing monster, calmly weighing his options.

His body was pretty much useless. He couldn't move his limbs at all. The shadow still followed his commands, but it was busy doing an important job — keeping him from dying immediately.

Even with its help, he wouldn't be able to last long.

But this was a useless thought. He couldn't do anything about it, so there was no sense in wasting time considering it further.

With his body immobilized, Memories couldn't be used.

That left only the Echo.

The carapace scavenger was going to have to be his only tool to either kill the enemy or prevent the enemy from killing him.

The monster was quickly approaching Sunny. Its mandibles moved, viscous saliva flowing down from them in a torrent of transparent mucus. In a flash of lightning, he was able to see and instantly register every spike, every scratch, every abrasion on the creature's carapace.

The handle of Changing Star's sword was still protruding from its body, washed in azure blood.

'What an ugly bastard.'

Sunny was being hypocritical. Truth be told, with its black carapace painted with crimson patterns and a mighty body specially designed for mayhem and slaughter, the scythe slayer looked striking and incredibly menacing.

It was almost majestic… in a terrifying, murderous kind of way.

Unable to move, he had to look helplessly as the monster closed the distance between them and loomed over Sunny's broken, bleeding body.

Its scythes rose into the air, ready to strike down.

Looking right into the monster's burning eyes, Sunny thought:

'Go to hell, you overgrown bug!'

The scythes shot toward his body.

…In the last moment, something massive and furious rammed into the monster from the side, throwing it away. It was Sunny's carapace scavenger.

Not bothering with its own safety anymore, the Echo entwined itself with the enemy in a chaotic mess of limbs as they rolled on the ground. Despite the fact that it was smaller and weaker, its crazy assault and complete disregard for its own life were enough to give the bigger monster some pause.

The Echo lashed out with its pincers, ramming them against the creature's carapace in a crazy whirlwind of blows. For a moment, the howling of the wind was drowned out by the clamor of chitin striking against chitin. The slayer's carapace mostly held, but a couple of cracks did appear on its black surface.

However, it was still superior to the scavenger in every way. Even with one of its scythes pinned awkwardly under its body, the monster was more than able to repel the

sudden attack. With an angry screech, it sliced with the other scythe, cutting one of the scavenger's pincer arms clean off. Then, it strained its legs and threw the smaller creature away.

In the process, the rear leg that was already wounded by Sunny broke off, but the monster didn't pay it any attention.

Burning with madness and fury, it untangled its limbs and slowly stood up. Another deafening screech resounded in the howling darkness of the storm, hurting Sunny's ears.

'Now what?' he thought, momentarily lost for ideas.

But then, something very unexpected happened.

As the slayer moved to finish off the Echo, it had to slightly raise and lean its torso back to account for the loss of a rear leg and keep its balance. At that moment, a bolt of lightning landed right in the middle of the small island.

With how tall the monster was, the lightning was immediately attracted to the handle of the sword that was still sticking from its body, aimed at the sky at a slight angle. At that moment, Changing Star's longsword suddenly became a lightning rod.

Instantly, hundreds of millions of volts of electricity coursed through the slayer's body.

In a blinding flash of light, it was thrown to the ground. Whisps of smoke rose from the cracks in its carapace.

In a strange turn of events, arcs of residual electricity danced on the monster's chitin, slowly accumulating on the crimson patterns on it. Under that influence, the crimson pattern changed its color, becoming white and incandescent.

Sunny stared at all this in bewilderment.

'It's… glowing?'

For a second, he hoped that the monster was dead. But no, a single strike of lightning was not enough to kill a creature like that. Just a few moments after being electrocuted, the slayer moved, slightly shaking its body.

Although it was in a rather bad shape, it was still alive and full of murderous intent.

Looking somewhat dazed, the monster gathered its limbs and tried to stand up. Slowly but surely, it was coming back to its senses. The bone scythes scraped against the rocks,

helping it rise.

However, before it did, Nephis was suddenly right in front of it.

Grabbing the hilt of the longsword, she grimaced as the heat burned her hands. Then, she twisted the blade, making the slayer's body twitch, and pulled it out, breaking apart a large portion of its lower torso armor.

The monster tried to slash at her with a scythe, but Changing Star was quicker. Dashing to the side, she simultaneously lashed out with her sword. The glowing, white-hot blade caught the creature's arm right below the joint and cleaved through it, sending the terrifying bone scythe flying through the air in a rain of azure blood.

The slayer screeched and swatted her away with one of its legs. Nephis was thrown back and rolled on the rocks, losing her grip on the sword. Her eyes momentarily lost focus.

The monster, on the contrary, was back to its sense. It seemed as though the sudden pain of losing a limb had shaken it wide awake. Raising to its full height, it opened its ugly mouth and let out a deafening, enraged shriek.

Then, it lunged toward Neph with all-consuming hatred burning in its eyes.

But it didn't get far.

Right as the livid monster was beginning its attack, the battered Echo appeared in its path. Its one remaining pincer shot forward, plunging into the wide gap in the armor created by Changing Star's sword. Twisting its arm, the scavenger pushed it inside the enemy's body, wreaking havoc on its innards.

In the end, it even lifted the whole monster in the air a little, its pincer going in almost up to the shoulder.

The slayer lashed out with its scythe, piercing the Echo's chest through.

Then, it twitched a couple of times and fell still.

The scavenger screeched angrily and jerked its pincer, tearing the bigger monster's torso clean off its carapace. Proudly giving the eviscerated enemy one last look, it then staggered and collapsed to the ground.

Sunny tiredly dismissed the Echo, hoping that it can survive.

He wasn't feeling too well.

In fact, he was pretty much done for.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Carapace Centurion.]

The Spell's voice fell uselessly on his deaf ears. It sounded distorted and distant.

[You have received a Memory: Starlight Legion Armor.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'I won.'

Sunny closed his eyes, finally allowing pain and exhaustion to flood his mind.

The fog was back, making everything feel like it was happening to someone else.

He was tired.

And he couldn't breathe.

Drowning in blood was not very pleasant.

As his conscience begin to slip, he heard the sound of someone's hurried steps.

And then, two soft hands gently touched his face…

Chapter-53: Immortal Flame

Somewhat surprised, Sunny struggled to open his eyes. As his vision slowly focused, he saw Neph's pale face looming above him. Her short silver hair was wet, sticking close to her skin.

She was kneeling beside his broken body, caressing his face with her hands. In her eyes, there was a strange expression.

It was as though she was frightened, but resigned to something.

Her pupils were wide and dark.

'Wh—what?'

Gritting her teeth, Nephis moved her hands to his collapsed chest and pressed them lightly against it, causing a pulse of pain to radiate through Sunny's body.

Then, a soft, radiant brilliance suddenly ignited beneath the skin of her palms, reflecting in her grey eyes like two dancing white sparks.

Almost immediately, Changing Star's face contorted in a grimace of excruciating agony, and she let out a terrible, muffled scream.

Her skin became white as a sheet of paper, and as she bit her lower lip, drops of blood soon rolled to her chin.

As the radiance grew in intensity, Nephis shut her eyes tightly, tears streaming down her tortured, bloodless face.

Sunny, on the contrary, felt like he was in heaven. All pain disappeared from his body, replaced by gentle, all-encompassing warmth. He felt as though he was being cleansed by something pure and sacred.

By a white, pristine, purifying flame.

Under the influence of the flame, his dying body began to repair itself. His shattered bones were reassembled from the shards. His torn flesh regenerated and became whole again. His collapsed lungs and damaged heart were brought back to life and rejuvenated, instantly turning strong and healthy.

Suddenly, he could breathe again.

As his chest moved, drawing in a new breath, Nephis flinched away with a harrowing moan. The white radiance beneath her skin dimmed and disappeared, letting the darkness return to its rightful place.

Crawling away a few steps, Changing Star stopped, kneeling on her knees and hands, and violently vomited. Her whole body was shivering uncontrollably, as though on the verge of a seizure.

As the shivers died down, she slowly lowered herself to the ground and lay there motionlessly, catching the raindrops with her mouth.

Sunny, meanwhile, raised his hands and carefully explored his body.

To his surprise, nothing really hurt. It was as though he was never wounded in the first place, let alone almost died.

With the help of Nephis and her mysterious Aspect Ability, he was completely healed.

It was a miracle.

***

By the time the storm was over, it was already deep into the night. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie huddled together for warmth and slept as though they were dead, too tired to make someone keep watch.

If anything were to happen, the shadow would probably alarm them in advance.

If not, so be it. They were just too exhausted to care.

Luckily, the rest of the night went without incidents.

In the morning, no one was in a hurry to make any plans or suggest leaving the cliffs. They just gathered some meat from the dead carapace centurion and the scavengers, collected the two soul shards and moved to the opposite side of the small island, afraid that the remains would attract some creature's attention.

As it turned out, they were right. Not long after the group left the place of the battle, a dark spot appeared in the sky. Soon, it became larger and approached the cliffs, landing near the corpse of the centurion in a whirlwind.

Sunny had never seen anything like it. The creature was massive in size, easily weighing twice as much as the carapace monster. Its body was white as a corpse and muscular, like that of a lion. It had two mighty paws in the back and six in the front, protruding messily out of its wide chest. Each ended with long, sharp talons.

The neck of the flying monstrosity was covered in long black feathers, as well as its enormous wings. Its head resembled that of a raven, with large round eyes and a terrifying black beak.

While they hid behind rocks, the creature feasted on the dead centurion, easily breaking its carapace apart with its talons and beak. Then, satisfied, it grabbed a few scavenger carcasses with its paws and rose back into the air, creating a small hurricane with each flap of its black wings.

The creature left the cliffs and flew back the way it came.

It was moving west.

Following the black dot as it disappeared into the distance, Sunny sighed.

"Neph. What do you think that thing is?"

Nephis was also looking at the sky. After a few seconds, she lowered her gaze.

"I have no idea."

Sunny simply nodded and went about his business. He still had to perform his thousand strikes.

After making a fire, they roasted the centurion's meat and had a delicious, hefty breakfast. Then, stuffed, the three of them layed down and lazily rested.

After fighting against two scavengers at once, running away and barely surviving the sudden flood, climbing tall cliffs in the middle of a storm and battling an awakened monster — all done in a single day — they deserved some time off.

Plus, Sunny needed to sort himself out. Truth be told, he was feeling a bit strange.

The reason for this was not his traumatic near-death experience, although it had a lot to do with it. The thing was that, after the unexpected epiphany he had while trying to fight against the deathly mind fog, Sunny felt as though he had been changed.

Because the clarity he gained never went away.

It was still here, at the center of his being. He felt as though his very way of thinking and perceiving the world was now completely different. It was stark, streamlined and dauntless.

Sunny felt that he had become calmer. He was now able to think much faster and act without hesitation. Many things that previously seemed obscure and frightening suddenly became predictable, and thus surmountable.

It was as though he had discovered an underlying order to the world that wasn't there before. That inner understanding gave him an advantage that was hard to explain with words.

In a sense, this change was even more profound than the transformation of his body at the end of the First Nightmare. He felt that he had made a big leap in his combat ability and overall power, even though it wasn't tied to the number of consumed shadow fragments or unlocked Aspect Abilities.

Looking at the sky, Sunny wondered if this was how Nephis always felt.

'Probably. Mastery of the body, mastery of the mind. Right?'

He was still far away from being a master. But it felt as though he was on the right track.

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Some time later, Sunny approached the western edge of the cliffs.

Nephis was sitting there, her feet dangling over the edge. She was looking west, lost in her thoughts.

He sat down beside the silver-haired girl and followed her gaze, trying to guess what she was thinking about.

Just like always, he failed. Changing Star was hard to understand.

Sunny shifted, feeling incredibly embarrassed. Finally, he gathered his courage and said:

"You saved my life twice yesterday."

Nephis glanced at him and turned away again.

"I did."

He hesitated, trying to find the correct words. In the end, he couldn't come up with anything and simply said:

"Thank you."

This time, she looked at him a bit longer. Her face was calm and indifferent.

"There's no need to thank me. Without you and your shadow, we would have drowned before reaching the cliffs or been torn apart by a large group of scavengers after stumbling on them in the labyrinth."

After that uncharacteristically long sentence, she fell silent and added after a while:

"We're allies."

Sunny nodded, knowing that she was right. Still, Nephis went above and beyond to keep him alive. Even if he had also done his part, not everyone would have gone to such lengths to return the favor.

However, he didn't say anything about it. Mostly because he could already imagine her answer.

Staring right at him, she would stay quiet for some time and then say something like "I just wanted to" or "It is what it is" in a flat tone. And then there would be an awkward silence.

With a subtle smile, Sunny looked away.

A minute or two later, he said:

"It's your Flaw, isn't it? The pain you feel every time you use your Ability?"

Nephis was silent for a while before answering. Then, she simply said:

"Yes."

Sunny looked at her. Changing Star's profile was calm and distant. The wind was playing with her short silver hair.

"What does it feel like?"

She was staring into the distance.

"Like burning alive."

He sighed, trying to imagine what kind of suffering someone being burned alive would have to endure. As always, the Spell was vile and cruel.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly after some time.

Nephis shrugged, not turning her head.

"It's just pain."

Sunny looked away, trying to hide his expression.

'Just pain.'

These might have been the saddest words he had ever heard.

Chapter-54: Spoils of War

For a long while, they just sat quietly together. Nephis was looking at the horizon, thinking about something only she knew about. Sunny's mind was strangely empty.

From time to time, he would cast a glance inside his Soul Sea, observing the recuperating Echo. The scavenger managed to survive its fight against the Carapace Centurion, even if it was just barely. Now, enveloped in a cocoon of light, it was flowing in the calming darkness of Sunny's soul and slowly regenerating.

If an Echo managed to retreat into the Sea of Soul alive, it would eventually recover from any wounds. The holes on the scavenger's carapace were already beginning to close. Its lost pincer arm, however, was not growing back any time soon.

Sunny sighed and summoned the runes. He decided to go over the spoils of the harrowing battle.

Shadow Fragments: [28/1000].

Since it was his Echo that delivered the final blow, the kill was considered to be his. Thus, he received four shadow fragments, two for each of the Centurion's awakened cores. The shards of the cores themselves went to Nephis as per their agreement. She decided to consume one herself and give the other one to Cassie.

The reward was sizable, but seemed disproportionate to the amount of trouble they had gone through to get rid of the terrifying monster. Ultimately, dormant humans like them were really not supposed to battle awakened Nightmare Creatures.

'No way, really?' he thought to himself, full of sarcasm.

It was just their bad luck that there was not a single Dormant-rank creature in this whole damned region of the Dream Realm.

Sunny remembered his lofty plans of hunting weak monsters while safely protected from all their attacks by his tier-five Awakened armor and couldn't help but smile bitterly.

Who knew that the Puppeteer's Shroud would turn out to be merely a minimum requirement for survival, as opposed to a huge, odds-defying advantage.

Still, that armor had already saved his life twice, so it was doing its job.

Speaking of armor…

He lowered his gaze.

Memory: [Starlight Legion Armor].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [Born in the all-consuming darkness, seven valiant heroes made an oath to return light to the cursed land. Time has erased their names and their faces, but the memory of the defiant oath still remains.]

'Teacher Julius would have been ecstatic to be reading this stuff.'

The old man used to be an avid explorer and student of the Dream Realm's history before becoming a professor in the Awakened Academy and settling down in one of the most prosperous human Citadels. He was still one of the leading researchers in that field, often irritating hunting expeditions with requests to explore this or that ruin.

Sadly, Sunny had no idea when they would meet again.

He cleared his throat and looked at Nephis.

"Anyway. I have a present for you."

She turned her head and looked at him with a bit of confusion.

"A… present?"

Sunny smiled.

"Yeah. I forgot to tell you that I received a Memory after we finished off the Centurion. Guess what type it is?"

He glanced at her expectedly. However, Changing Star did not guess. In fact, her expression did not even show a hint of curiosity. After an awkward pause, Sunny had to

look away.

"Uh. It's an armor. So, give me your hand."

Physical contact was required to transfer a Memory. Otherwise, he would have preferred to avoid it for as long as possible. There had already been too much contact between them for his mental composure.

In retrospect, being invaded by the healing flame was a strangely intimate experience. Not to mention the memory of her soft touch…

Not that he had been in any condition to think about such things back then.

Staring right at him, Nephis slowly held out a hand. Sunny hurriedly grasped it in his own, wishing to be done with this part of the process as soon as possible.

Her skin was cool and soft.

Trying not to get distracted, he willed the Starlight Legion Armor to be expelled from his Soul Sea. One of the spheres of light disappeared from the Shadow Core's orbit. Immediately, he felt something akin to a spark of electricity moving through his body and into Changing Star's.

She blinked and retracted her hand.

Then, Nephis stood up, walked a few steps away from the edge of the cliff, and summoned the Memory.

Spinning sparks of light appeared around her. A moment later, they covered her porcelain body and turned into a black, skintight bodysuit made out of an unknown, durable material. It looked quite similar to the rubbery seaweed that permeated the area.

Then, intricate pieces of pristine white plate armor materialized over the black bodysuit. First the greaves and vambraces, then articulated pauldrons and rerebraces, then cuisses and sabatons. Finally, a breastplate engraved with seven shining stars appeared to protect Neph's torso, short enough to pose no hindrance to her mobility. It was followed by a helmet with a white plume.

The engraving of the seven stars was identical to those carved into the giant knight statue's cuirass.

The armor looked light and elegant. It was simultaneously functional and flattering, both providing high levels of protection and accentuating the graceful lines of Changing Star's body. A stark contrast of black and white made for quite a striking sight.

Nephis dismissed the helmet, letting her silver hair move in the wind. Then, she summoned her sword and performed a few tentative pirouettes, testing out the weight and flexibility of the armor. Seemingly satisfied, she then let the sword disappear into the air.

Sunny observed all this in silence. When Neph was finally done, he asked:

"Well? How is it?"

She turned to him. Soon, a wide smile appeared on her face. Beaming with delight, Nephis hesitated and finally said with a bit of embarrassment:

"Much better."

Sunny heaved a sigh of relief.

At least now all three of them were properly clothed. That was good.

Really good!

Not only because Changing Star's combat effectiveness would dramatically increase due to the acquisition of a reliable armor, but also because now he wouldn't have to be distracted every time he saw her…

Chapter-55: Lucky People

When they returned to the makeshift camp, the first thing that Nephis did was come up to Cassie.

"Hey, Cas. Guess what."

The blind girl turned to her and smiled:

"You've finally received an armor-type Memory?"

Simultaneously, Nephis said:

"I found something decent to wear…"

Then she fell silent and stared at her smiling friend. Cassie laughed:

"The sound of your footsteps changed."

Changing Star blinked.

"Ah. I see. Well… it's from the Carapace Centurion."

While she was describing the armor to Cassia and letting her touch the mysterious white metal it was forged out of, Sunny relaxed and rested by the fire.

Some time later, Nephis was busy preparing dinner. Sunny was once again lying lazily on the stones and staring into the sky.

The sky, like always, was grey and unfriendly.

With all three of them equipped with decent armor, they were finally starting to resemble a real Awakened cohort. In fact, Sunny thought that their group was rather eye-catching even by Awakened standards.

In her light tunic and sea-wave cloak, beautiful and delicate Cassie looked like a princess. Lithe and poised, Nephis was like a noble knight tasked with protecting her. Sunny, however…

If he was generous to himself, he would say that he looked like a young squire.

But truthfully, he resembled a page boy a lot more — at best. If a random stranger were to see the three of them, that stranger would most likely assume that Sunny was either a lowly servant or a feeble ruffian that had been captured by the noble lady's guard.

'Well, that'll just add to their surprise when I stab them in the back.'

Wait… why would he stab a random stranger?

'Ah, who cares. I'm sure there'll be a reason.'

At that moment, Cassie sat down by his side. Sunny turned his head, looking at the blind girl with a bit of surprise.

She bit her lip.

"Nephis told me that you almost died yesterday."

'Oh, so that's what this is about.'

He shrugged.

"Yeah."

Then, with a silent sigh, Sunny added:

"But don't worry about it too much. It's not my first brush with death."

Although it was, as far as he knew, the closest. The memory still sent shivers running down his spine.

Cassie was silent for a while. Then, she quietly said:

"I'm sorry."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?"

The blind girl lowered her eyes.

"For being so useless."

Sunny frowned and looked away. A second or two later, he said in his usual careless tone:

"You're not useless."

Cassie softly chuckled.

"Aren't I? If I want to walk, I need to be leashed to you or Neph. If I want to eat, I need to wait for one of you to feed me. That's my life now. I can't do even the simplest of things without your help… let alone be of use to either of you in return."

Slowly, her voice turned raw with emotion. This was the first time Sunny had seen her mask of resolve slip a little, revealing the desperate, angry, frightened face beneath. He was silent for a long time. Then, he said:

"Hey, have I ever told you about my First Nightmare?"

The blind girl shook her head. Sunny half-closed his eyes.

"My First Nightmare was as bad as it gets. To tell you the truth, the situation was pretty hopeless. I was a slave destined to die of cold or mistreatment. Chained, bleeding, defenseless. What's worse, my Aspect turned out to be completely useless. I mean, literally.

If I remember correctly, the phrase the Spell chosen to describe it was "a useless wretch with no skills or abilities worth a mention."

Cassie turned her head slightly, visibly drawn in by his words.

"Then… how did you survive? Did things change for the better?"

Sunny smiled.

"Gods no. In fact, they quickly turned worse. Much, much worse. But, what would you know? In a strange twist of fate, my useless Aspect turned out to be the only thing that could guide me through that mess alive. In that regard, I was incredibly lucky."

He shifted a little and glanced at the delicate girl, noticing a thoughtful frown on her face.

"But here is a thing about luck. People usually speak about it as though luck is something that just happens to you. It's not. Luck is fifty percent circumstance and fifty percent your own ability to grasp it. Luck is something you have to make happen yourself. I fought with everything I had to survive.

That's one of the two reasons I'm still here."

Saying that, Sunny remembered the cold, dark mountain and shivered. Then, pushing the chilling memories away, he continued:

"The second reason is the Spell itself. I won't go as far as to call it reasonable, but it is fair… in its own, perverted way. The Spell takes with one hand and gives with the other. It was like this with my First Nightmare, and it is the same with you."

Cassie's frown deepened. Sunny chose his next words very carefully. Eventually, he said:

"Your Flaw is the most debilitating one I have ever seen or heard of. You are right, without help from someone like Neph, it would have been a certain death sentence. And people like her… well, I'm not even sure that someone else like that exists. But…"

The blind girl gritted her teeth.

"But what?"

Sunny looked at her with a serious expression.

"But that also means that the other side of the Flaw, your power, is equally as extraordinary. You just haven't found the way to grasp it yet. When you do… believe me, you'll remember this conversation and feel very embarrassed about how naive and foolish you were."

Cassie's expression changed to one of doubt and confusion.

"Do you really think so?" she whispered.

There was a hint of desperate desire in her voice. However, the question itself almost made him laugh, for an obvious reason.

"Trust me. I'm the most honest person in the world. Two worlds, in fact."

…Sunny would actually love nothing more than to be less honest, but, sadly, he was physically incapable of doing so. Of course, she didn't have to know that.

Cassie was silent for a long time, lost in thought. It looked as though she was in the throes of some inner struggle. Sunny almost assumed that their conversation was over, but then she suddenly said in a low, raspy voice:

"I had more visions than I told you guys about."

Chapter-56: The Heaviest Thing in the World

He blinked, staring at the blind girl with surprise and a bit of apprehension. Her sudden statement really threw him off. Why would she keep something like this secret? And why tell him now?

Confused, he asked carefully:

"More… visions? Why haven't you told us?"

A fleeting, tired smile appeared on Cassie's face. She lowered her head and remained silent for a while. Then, closing her eyes, she said:

"You probably don't know. How could you know? But knowledge… knowledge can be really heavy. It can be as heavy as the heaviest thing in the world."

Then, a sad smile appeared on her face.

"I am afraid that by telling you, I will actually cause the things I saw to come true."

Sunny tensed up, alarmed by the implication behind her words. If she was afraid of the visions coming true, then their content must have been pretty bad. And if it was really bad…

If something terrible was destined to befall them, Sunny had to know about it in advance. That way, he would be able to make preparations and deal with whatever happens. As long as he was prepared, many things would become much less dire. However… what if his preparations would become the very reason for that terrible thing to happen, making Cassie's vision a self-fulfilling prophecy?

This was the danger of knowing the future.

'Damn it, my head hurts. I hate this crap!'

Sunny struggled for a long time, trying to decide if he should pressure Cassie to reveal her visions. Either outcome was going to leave him uneasy, so he was really not sure what to do. In the end, unable to make a decision, Sunny simply remained silent. Cassie also didn't say anything.

After some time had passed, she finally spoke:

"Can you… can you just promise me one thing?"

It seemed as though this was her attempt to find a compromise between revealing everything and doing nothing. Sunny frowned.

"That depends on what it is."

The blind girl hesitated before speaking.

"Can you promise that you'll take care of Neph? No matter what?"

He delayed answering for as long as the growing pain allowed him. When it became almost unbearable, Sunny reluctantly said:

"I can't. I can barely take care of myself."

He also didn't trust Nephis enough to make a promise like that. He had nothing against Changing Star and even liked her quite a bit, but they didn't really know each other. Their alliance was one of necessity, not choice. Who knew what would happen once their need for each other was no longer there? "No matter what" was too steep of a requirement.

Of course, he could have misled Cassie by answering "yes". After all, the question was whether or not he could make a promise, not whether or not he would follow through with it. But at that moment, Sunny was strangely reluctant to deceive the blind girl.

Maybe that whole honesty thing was slowly growing on him.

Cassie sighed and turned away. Suddenly, it felt like something imperceptible about her changed.

"I see. Yeah. That's fair."

With that, she summoned her staff and walked away, leaving Sunny in a somber and uneasy mood — just like he had expected.

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No matter how much he tried to relax after that, his thoughts kept wandering. Eventually, Sunny found himself trying to find connections between various pieces of information about the Starless Void — or the Forgotten Shore, as it was called in the Azure Blade's description.

If nothing else, it could distract him from thinking about the latter part of their conversation with Cassie.

Also, for some reason, the need to understand their environment suddenly seemed much more vital.

His sword, the Starlight Legion Armor, the carapace monsters and the giant headless statue seemed to be connected in some way, but he couldn't quite understand how. Was the statue a monument to one of the seven founders of the Starlight Legion?

The line of runes describing the armor said that their names and faces were lost to time. The statue's missing head would certainly fit that description.

The scavenger's Echo suggested that the carapace monsters were "cursed soldiers of the fallen legion". Was that fallen legion the Starlight Legion? The fact that he had received the Starlight Armor after slaying a carapace centurion was almost a certain confirmation of that theory. If so, why were they cursed?

Starless Void, Starlight Legion… what did all of it mean? The seven heroes were described as being born in the "all-consuming darkness". Their oath was to return light to the cursed land. What light did they seek? Starlight? And what was the nature of the all-consuming darkness?

Was it the manifestation of the curse that befell their land? And if so, was it the same curse that eventually turned soldiers of the Starlight Legion into carapace monsters?

If the curse was still around… was Sunny going to wake up one day with patches of chitin growing over his skin?

'What a creepy thought.'

The seven heroes were forgotten, but the memory of their oath, apparently, still remained. "On this forgotten shore, only steel remembers"... that was the Azure Blade's description. Was there a hidden meaning behind these words? Were the Memories received on the Forgotten Shore hiding a secret?

Inwardly, Sunny groaned.

'So many questions, and not a single answer!'

And then there was the main mystery — Cassie's vision… the one she chose to reveal to them. She dreamt of a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Once the seals were broken, the darkness escaped. She also saw a crimson spire with seven severed heads guarding seven locks. Were these locks connected to the seals?

And was the giant knight's missing head one of the seven guarding them?

Or was he completely wrong about everything, leaping to conclusions and forcing connections where none existed?

Sunny sighed, knowing that his curiosity would not be quenched any time soon. He had too little information to make a proper theory. If so, there was no point in torturing himself right now…

Maybe things would become clearer in the future.

The word "future" made him frown.

Chapter-57: Use of Weapons

In the evening, Sunny continued to practice with the sword under Neph's watchful eye. With his new insight, every movement felt different from before. After the thousand strikes were finished, he sat down to rest and studied the Azure Blade, tempted to continue obsessing over the abundant mysteries of the Forgotten Shore.

After a while, Sunny asked:

"Do you think I'm well-suited to use a sword? Should I consider switching weapons in the future?"

Nephis shrugged.

"That depends on your goals. However, the sword is considered to be the king of weapons for a reason."

Sunny smiled.

"And why is that?"

She tilted her head and deliberated for a few seconds. Then, she asked:

"Do you know how natural selection works?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Survival of the fittest? The strongest species survives?"

Changing Star glanced at him.

"Somewhat correct. But actually, it's not the strongest species that survive, it's the most adaptable. Otherwise, lions and tigers and bears would have been the ones ruling the world instead of humans."

Sunny knew about lions and bears from archival footage, but he had no idea what a tiger was.

'Probably another extinct predator?'

Meanwhile, Neph continued, not at all like her usual taciturn self. She seemed to be much more eloquent when talking about subjects she was confident in.

"The same logic can be applied to combat. A sword is not the most effective tool in every situation. A spear is more useful against enemies with long reach. A war hammer is much better against armor. A mace is easier to maintain. However, swords are the most versatile."

She cast a gaze at the Azure Blade.

"A sword can pierce, it can cut, it can bash. It can be used effectively at a variety of ranges. It is swift and maneuverable. Every part of the sword, from tip to pommel, can be used to attack. While wielding a sword, you won't be the best at everything. But you'll be the most adaptable."

Nephis turned to him.

"Do you understand?"

Sunny thought for a bit before answering.

"I think I do."

She gave him a nod and looked away.

"But in the end, you must remember one thing. It doesn't matter that much what's in your hands. A sword, a spear, a club… they're just tools. You are the weapon."

He sighed and dismissed the Azure Blade. As always, Changing Star's lesson gave him a lot to think about.

'You are the weapon.'

He repeated it in his mind, feeling as though another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

Together, they watched the sun set in comfortable silence. As the night approached, the sea was coming back, flooding the crimson labyrinth like a rush of darkness. Far below

them, scavengers were scurrying to find a hiding place. A few of them were climbing the cliffs, hoping to spend the night on the small island.

Sunny's shadow was keeping an eye on them.

"We're going to have guests soon," he said, disheartened at the thought that their short respite was about to end.

Nephis sighed.

"That's alright. With the higher ground advantage, dealing with them won't be too hard."

Sunny nodded and looked at the disappearing sun. Suddenly, his mood turned solemn. Doubt raised its ugly head, plunging his mind into the gloomy embrace of anxiety. Staring into the distance, Sunny hesitated and asked:

"Do you think we'll be able to reach that castle?"

She glanced at him with no particular expression on her face.

"Yes."

He turned to her and forced a smile.

"Why are you so sure?"

In the blood-red blaze of the sunset, Changing Star's calm eyes seemed to burn with heavenly fire. Looking west, she summoned her sword and answered:

"If that is our will, who dares to stop us?"

***

Dealing with the climbing scavengers, indeed, turned out to be comparatively easy. Sunny and Nephis just had to ambush and push the bulky creatures off the cliff before they could find stable purchase. He received four shadow fragments practically for free, increasing the overall number to thirty-two. Sadly, the soul shards couldn't be retrieved.

They spent another day on the cliffs, resting and training. Sunny practiced with the sword while his shadow explored the nearby paths of the labyrinth. With the Echo still recovering, their group was not in its optimal condition. That's why there was no point in hastily abandoning their current camp.

However, very soon they were going to resume the journey west, moving from one height to another in hopes of reaching the mysterious human citadel.

This time they were not going to travel without sufficient preparations. Knowing that a sudden storm can come at any moment, covering the world with darkness and summoning the sea back before sunset, the three Sleepers decided to thoroughly scout a route before committing to moving their camp to the next landmark.

Nephis spent the day meditating. Her eyes were closed. From time to time, it seemed as though a soft white glow was radiating from behind her eyelids. However, when Sunny looked closely, it was always gone, making him think that he was just imagining things.

He suspected that Changing Star was training herself to endure the pain of her Flaw.

If so, he wished her luck.

Cassie behaved like her usual self, being cheerful and friendly. It was as though their strange conversation had never happened. However, Sunny could feel that something about her was different. He couldn't quite put a finger on what exactly had changed about the blind girl, but she seemed to possess more resolve. It wasn't a bad thing.

They spent some time chatting and remembering their time in the Academy. Sunny told her about his lessons with Teacher Julius and various strange things he had learned from the old man. Her reaction to the idea of studying dead languages of the Dream Realm was exactly the same as Sunny's initial protest and bewilderment.

Soon, the night was upon them again. This time, no scavenger tried to climb the cliffs, so Sunny and Nephis could rest easy. However, they still slept in turns, keeping watch over the camp in case something unexpected happens.

In the morning, they ate the last of the centurion's meat and prepared to climb down into the labyrinth.

It was time to continue their journey.

Chapter-58: Survival of the Fittest

Days later, Sunny was sitting on top of a dead scavenger, calmly cleaning the azure blood off his face.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

His sword was still stuck between the plates of chitin armor, trembling slightly as the beast's body convulsed before falling still.

Somewhere behind him, the sound of breaking carapaces announced that Nephis was already digging out soul shards from the corpses of the creatures they had slain. After dozens of such battles, the two of them were nothing if not efficient.

Glancing back, he evaluated the scene of carnage.

The path between two crimson walls was littered with corpses. Initially, they were simply planning to lure the carapace centurion that had been tracking them for the past few days into this narrow passage to turn its size against the monster. However, things quickly took a turn.

Attracted by the noise of the battle, both the scavengers and the weird centipede creatures that were waging war against the carapace legion in this part of the labyrinth showed up to join the fight. In the ensuing mayhem, Sunny and Nephis used the animosity between the two tribes of monsters to their advantage and ended up as the only victors.

Not far from him, the Echo was mutilating the corpse of the centurion. Its lost arm had long grown back. Now, the scavenger was tearing pieces of monster meat with its new pincer and vindictively devouring them.

Technically, an Echo wasn't supposed to experience hunger. This one, however, had seemingly acquired a hatred for carapace centurions after their encounter with the massive scythe slayer on that fateful stormy night.

It had already been two weeks since they left the cliffs. In that time, many things had changed, while many remained the same.

Moving from one high point to another, they steadily traveled west. With Cassie riding atop the Echo, the speed of the group was dramatically enhanced. Still, they took care to explore paths to their next stop before committing to a day-long journey.

This way, the risk of being caught in another storm was minimized, as they could always either reach the next landmark in time or return to the previous one.

Their approach to traveling through the labyrinth had also changed. In the past, Nephis and Sunny tried to avoid the scavengers, resorting to fighting them only if there was no other choice. However, the battle with the centurion opened their eyes to the fact that they desperately needed to become stronger, and do it fast.

That's why they began to actively hunt the carapace beasts, taking out any creatures that were either completely isolated or moving in groups of no more than three. The idea of two Sleepers consciously seeking out Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened rank was pretty ridiculous, but somehow, they made it work.

Just as Nephis had said, both of them were abnormal.

Clad in the Starlight Legion Armor, Changing Star, who had always been an extremely formidable fighter, was now able to showcase the full extent of her combat ability. Simply put, she was a menace. It seemed as though her silver sword had a mind of its own. Whenever the tall figure in white armor appeared, rivers of azure blood were sure to flow.

What's more, Neph's powers grew with each soul shard she consumed. Every increase was barely noticeable, but with dozens of them added up together, the difference was apparent. She was slowly approaching the line between the peak of human physical form and the threshold of superhuman prowess.

The same could be said about Sunny, although, in his case, it was predicated on the timely use of the shadow. His own body had become considerably stronger due to the rigors of the Dream Realm, but it was still far away from reaching its peak potential.

While Nephis was growing more powerful through the consumption of soul shards, he was quickly collecting shadow fragments. Of course, he wasn't able to get every kill, so their amount was less than that of the shards. But he also didn't have to share them with Cassie, which Changing Star was continuously doing.

As the result, the rate of their progress was more or less the same.

However, the slow accumulation of power was not the only factor that influenced the rapid growth of their combat effectiveness.

Sunny's skill level and battle sense were also improving by leaps and bounds. Under the tutelage of sword goddess Nephis herself, he was quickly learning the ins and outs of wielding the blade.

Then, he was forced to apply these lessons to practice, participating in bloody battles each day with his life on the line. This brutal, merciless reality was, for better or worse, the best training grounds for a true fighter. There was no room for mistakes, only progress — because a single mistake would most likely become his last.

One real fight was worth a thousand hours of training. With experience, Sunny was able to gain knowledge. With clarity, he was able to turn this knowledge into a seed of understanding.

But even that wasn't the biggest contributor to the dramatic increase in the group's overall might.

The main culprit was, to his endless surprise, teamwork.

After fighting side by side for so long, Sunny and Nephis had developed a tacit, intuitive understanding. Without the need for words and signals, they were able to act in unison with each other, perfectly coordinating their attacks and actions to better control the battlefield and destroy their opponents.

The importance of this unity was hard to overestimate. With proper cooperation, it was as though their numbers doubled. The effect was immediate and overwhelming — at least as long as they chose their battles carefully. It was nothing short of jolly.

With all this added up together, their group had turned from a trio of lost kids into a cohort of well-equipped, experienced and battle-hardened survivors.

Even Cassie was becoming stronger. Apart from the boost she had received from absorbing the soul shards, the blind girl was also slowly learning to live and function with her disability.

After all, it was less than two months since she lost her sight. Cassie was still adapting to her condition, and she was doing an incredible job, considering the circumstances.

She was still unable to help them fight against the monsters, but the burden of taking care of her was becoming less and less heavy. Sunny had also grown accustomed to it, even finding the time spent watching over the blind girl somewhat calming.

The goal of reaching the human castle did not seem as impossible as it had before.

And now, he felt as though they were getting closer and closer.

Chapter-59: Shadow of the Crimson Spire

Jumping off the dead scavenger, Sunny retrieved his sword and whistled, letting Cassie know that it was safe to come out. Soon, she crawled out of a small opening in the coral wall and carefully put her feet on the ground. Leaning on her staff, the blind girl stood up and slightly turned her head, listening to the light sound of his footsteps.

Sunny approached Cassie and took her hand, gently placing it on his shoulder. Then, carefully avoiding puddles of blood, he guided the blind girl to the Echo. They talked on the way.

"Did those centipedes show up?"

During their journey through the labyrinth, they discovered that the scavengers were not the only creatures populating it. Different types of monsters lived in the crimson forest, hiding inside the reefs during the night and coming out to hunt once the sun was up.

There were sentient colonies of carnivorous worms that attacked from beneath the black mud, flesh-eating flowers that strangled their prey with bloodsucking vines, and weird transparent tentacles that they had once seen dragging a desperately resisting scavenger into a dark, cavernous crevice.

They still didn't know what type of creature had been hiding in the crevice. Sunny hoped that they would never find out.

In short, the labyrinth was home to all kinds of horrors, every one of them at least of the Awakened rank. They were all carrion eaters, living off the remains left behind by the monsters of the dark sea. Given the opportunity, they were also more than willing to devour each other — not to mention the three juicy humans.

Luckily, the carapace legion turned out to be extremely territorial and seemed to have the upper hand in this region of the crimson reef. While their armor, size and physical

strength made the scavengers formidable opponents, dealing mostly with one type of creature was infinitely better than constantly facing unknown danger.

The centipede monsters were the latest enemy of the carapace legion they had met. Some of these critters were more than three meters long, with glistening red chitin and hundreds of tiny, scurrying legs. They were abhorrently fast and agile, being able to move through mud, climb the coral walls and even drop on the unsuspecting victims from above with incredible speed.

What's worse, their bodies were able to secrete a corrosive black oil that melted through the strongest armor in seconds. The only redeeming quality of the centipede monsters was that their chitin shells weren't very tough and could be easily pierced by a sword.

Sunny answered without turning back:

"Yeah, six of them. And a few scavengers, too. We let them fight each other and then finished off the survivors."

Cassie gulped.

"Were you hurt?"

"Nothing our armor couldn't handle."

"What about the centurion?"

He glanced at the half-devoured carcass and smiled.

"It's not going to bother us again."

This was the second awakened monster they had slain after entering the Dream Realm. Compared to the first encounter, this battle went much smoother. No one died, no one was seriously injured.

The Echo even kept both of its pincers.

"How many soul shards did we get?"

Sunny counted.

"Should be eleven."

Now it was Cassie's turn to smile.

"That's our biggest haul so far! By a lot!"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

However, they had once again failed to receive a Memory. Sunny wasn't sure if his bad luck was to blame, but neither he nor Nephis had been able to acquire a single one for the past two weeks. It was almost as though the Spell had decided that they had already gotten enough.

'There can never be enough!'

He sighed.

One of the games he and Cassie liked to play during camp was to discuss what they would buy after coming back to the real world and becoming rich. However, he had to collect a few Memories to auction off first. Otherwise, where would the money come from?

Consumed by greed and avarice, Sunny approached the Echo and looked up at it with disapproval.

"Hey, you! Stop chewing!"

The scavenger obediently froze, a piece of meat still hanging from its mouth.

"Spit it out!"

Shaking his head, Sunny helped Cassie climb to her seat and handed her the reigns.

"This weirdo actually gobbled up almost half of the centurion. What's up with that? Of all the Echoes in the world, why did I have to get stuck with a defective one?"

His shadow solemnly nodded, expressing that it completely understood his sentiment. Sunny squinted at it. What a rare show of solidarity. The shadow didn't have any Echoes, though…

What defective individual was it stuck with?

'Cheeky bastard…'

Cassie laughed.

"Don't badmouth my steed. He is a great Echo! I like him very much."

'It's a "he" now, huh?'

Sunny shook his head again and got to stripping the remaining meat off the centurion's carcass. Then, he placed the meat into the seaweed saddlebags attached to the scavenger. He had made these bags himself to increase the group's carrying capacity. After all, the scavenger was supposed to be extremely strong — not using it to their advantage would have been an oversight.

After that, Sunny sighed and got to the least pleasant task — harvesting the oil sacks from the centipede monsters' corpses. Each had two of them, connected to a special gland. The whole process was more disgusting than dangerous, since the corrosive effect was only achieved after the liquids from the two sacks were mixed.

They had not come up with a way to utilize the centipede oil yet, but Nephis insisted on collecting as much of it as possible. She was sure that it was going to be of use one day.

At the very least, the oil was highly flammable.

Speaking of Nephis, by the time Sunny was done collecting the sacks, she had already gathered all the soul shards and was standing in front of the Echo. He showed her his trophies and carefully placed them in a separate saddlebag.

"All done?"

She nodded.

Sunny looked at the sky, trying to determine the time. The sun was right above them, high in the grey sky. There was still plenty of daytime left.

"What do you think? We're right inbetween the Flat Hill and the Bone Ridge. Should we return or try to reach the Ridge today?"

The ground level of the labyrinth was not uniform. Some parts of it were situated higher than the others. Currently, they were in one such area. The dark sea was much more shallow here, which meant that there were more natural features that remained above water during the night. That made for shorter distance between them.

Nephis thought for a bit, then said:

"Let's push to the Bone Ridge."

They had already scouted most of the way to it yesterday, so there wasn't much danger of getting lost in the labyrinth and not making it on time. With the carapace centurion dead, the unpredictable element that had been making their lives harder for these past few days was also gone. Considering this, Changing Star's decision seemed proper.

Sunny nodded.

"Okay."

With that, he sent his shadow forward.

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Some time later, they were approaching the Bone Ridge. The sun was preparing to set, but there was still enough time to get to safety. Sunny, however, felt alarmed and uncomfortable.

This feeling began to pursue him soon after they had left the cliffs. It always appeared close to the evening and persisted until the last minutes of the sunset, then disappeared, leaving him puzzled and uneasy. The further west they traveled, the stronger the feeling became.

It was as though something was not quite right with the world during that time. But no matter how hard Sunny tried to understand what that wrongness was, he couldn't.

In the end, he decided to share his uneasiness with the group. After listening to him, the girls were surprised. It seemed that they did not notice anything strange. Even Cassie, whose affinity to revelations provided her with an incredible intuition, didn't experience the strange feeling.

However, she did suggest a theory. Since Sunny was the only one susceptive to the feeling, it was logical to assume that there was something unique about him that made it possible. And the only difference he had from the girls in terms of perception was his shadow sense.

Which meant that the source of the wrongness, most likely, had something to do with the behavior of shadows.

Guided by her advice, Sunny was finally able to understand the reason for his discomfort. As it turns out, Cassie was right — in the hours closest to sunset, when the

sun was hanging low in the western skies, a vast shadow moved through the labyrinth, affecting his senses and making his skin crawl.

The shadow was too distant and colossal to be seen, but he could still feel its presence.

When he told Cassie about the immense shadow, she nodded, as though it explained everything.

Then, she said:

"That is the shadow of the Crimson Spire."

Chapter-60: Bone Ridge

Back then, it took him a couple of seconds to realize what she was talking about.

"The spire from your vision? The one with seven seals?"

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. In my dream, it seemed to be as tall as a mountain. I could even see it from the walls of the human castle, looming in the distance like a crimson spear piercing the skies. When the sun sets, the Spire's vast shadow falls over the castle and stretches east, as far as you can see."

She was silent for a moment, then added:

"The feeling I got when looking at the Crimson Spire was very similar to what you had described, only much more intense."

Sunny frowned, trying to remember the exact words Cassie had used to describe her vision. Seven severed heads guarding seven seals… a dying angel being devoured by hungry shadows… feeling of extreme terror and loss…

What was the deal with that Spire, exactly?

"Is it crimson because it's made out of the same stuff as the labyrinth?"

The crimson "coral" surrounding them was not, in fact, coral. It's just what they called it based on some resemblance, for the sake of simplicity. The actual nature of the strange material remained a mystery.

Cassie hesitated.

"Maybe it's the other way around. Maybe the labyrinth is made from the same stuff as the Spire."

In other words, the Crimson Spire might have been the source of all this madness. Still, it was just a theory — there was too little information to confirm it.

However, Sunny did feel that the Spire was, in one way or another, at the center of all things that they had encountered. He just hoped that it wouldn't be their final destination.

Knowing the reason behind his restlessness, Sunny was able to endure it much better. He even found a hidden benefit to this situation — as long as he sensed the shadow of the Crimson Spire, he could pinpoint the direction to the human castle, since it was situated somewhere between their location and the source of the shadow.

In a sense, the Crimson Spire had become his inner compass.

"Get ready."

Neph's voice took Sunny out of his reverie. Shaking off the distracting thoughts, he focused on the task at hand.

They were getting close to the Bone Ridge.

This name came to their minds as soon as they had first laid their eyes on this towering landmark. It was visible from quite a distance, sharply contrasted against the crimson coral and the grey sky in all its ivory splendor.

The Bone Ridge was, in fact, made of bone. The skeletal remains of a colossal sea monster lay on an enormous mound of chaotically growing coral, with its arching spine protruding especially high above the ground. It was impossible to say what the terrifying creature had looked like while it was still alive, but one thing was certain — it was gargantuan even by the standards of the dark sea.

This wasn't the first giant skeleton they saw during their journey. In fact, the labyrinth was littered with remains of dead leviathans, their massive bones forming natural arches and palaces throughout it. They were easy to spot because the coral formations were especially tall and dense in their vicinity, as though trying to bury any sign of whiteness in the sea of crimson.

Sunny, however, had a feeling that the situation was actually reversed. To him, it seemed as though the coral was actually growing out of the old bones and spreading in every direction, slowly consuming the world. When he looked at the crimson mounds surrounding the colossal remains, he couldn't help but see them as rivers of ancient, solidified blood.

He was almost sure that if they were to dig deep enough into the black mud to find the roots of the crimson forest, they would find nothing but endless layers of bones.

What a scary image.

Regardless of what Sunny thought about the nature of the labyrinth, the beast whose remains formed the Bone Ridge was especially large. Thanks to that, a portion of its long spine was tall enough to remain above the water during the night. That's why they had chosen it as the next stop on their journey.

With the evening approaching, the next task was crucial. They had to scale the dead leviathan and make sure that no other creature had decided to take shelter in its remains.

If something did, they had no choice but to try and kill it, since there was no time to retreat to their previous safe haven.

The last step was often the riskiest.

Coming to the base of the coral mound, the group moved around it, searching for a convenient path up. Eventually, they arrived in front of the creature's cracked, misshapen skull. With its lower jaw missing or buried under the mud, the upper formed a vast, cavernous cave.

Feeling shivers running down his spine, Sunny passed beneath the terrifying palisade of teeth and entered the cave. With his shadow leading the way, they made way to the back of the creature's skull and soon entered the hollow expanse of its spine.

Inside the spine, the bone surface under their feet was as wide as a road. Actually, it looked a lot like a highway running through a long tunnel, with stark beams of light falling through the gaps between the massive vertebrae. The tunnel was inclined upward, most of its length hidden behind the bend of the ceiling.

When the Echo entered the spine, its chitin legs produced a loud, echoing clatter.

Nephis grimaced.

"Any movement?"

Sunny checked with the shadow and shook his head.

Changing Star looked forward and slightly lowered her chin.

"Let's proceed."

Despite the fact that the shadow had not noticed any danger, they still summoned their swords before moving forward. It was not their first time being ambushed at the edge of safety.

Luckily, their precautions turned out to be unnecessary. Nothing was hiding inside the gargantuan remains, so they were able to reach the highest point of the spine without having to cut their way through an unknown number of monsters.

By the time they got to safety, the sun was already setting. The dark sea was returning, filling the inside of the sea monster's spine with the echoing sound of rushing water. Sunny took the saddlebags off the Echo and dismissed it, making their camp instantly feel much roomier.

All three of them were in desperate need of a bath. Leaving the girls alone to give them an opportunity to wash themselves, Sunny walked some distance away and sat down, letting his tired body rest.

His shadow returned to the lower parts of the spine, watching the black, dim water slowly rise and devour the ivory whiteness. He had to make sure that nothing would crawl out of the water at the last minute.

With half of his mind preoccupied with observing the rising tide, the other half was free to wander. Sunny summoned the runes and checked the number of shadow fragments in his possession.

Shadow Fragments: [96/1000].

Not bad… he only had twelve at the beginning of all this. In less than a month, the amount increased dramatically. He was stronger and faster now. He was also more experienced.

However, that still left him far inferior to even the weakest Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore in terms of raw physical might, even with the help of the shadow.

'How long before I'm able to wrestle a scavenger with my bare hands?'

The answer was pretty obvious, not to mention extremely disappointing — not before his own Shadow Core had awakened, which could only happen after returning to the real world.

Sunny sighed.

Soon, it was his turn to wash. Taking the Bottle of Endless Water from refreshed, rosy Cassie, he walked back to his secluded spot and dismissed the Pupetter's Shroud.

A cold breeze touched his pale skin, making Sunny shiver. He looked down, shaking his head at the amount of dirt, sweat and dried blood that was covering his body.

Being an Awakened was not the cleanest of professions.

While he was washing up, Nephis used the remaining time before nightfall to make a fire and cook some meat. These days, they even had salt to season it. At first, the idea of using the sea salt left behind by the dark sea did not seem very appealing, but after a while, they grew accustomed to it.

Salt made every meal they had much tastier.

They ate in silence, too hungry and tired to talk. Soon, it was time to sleep.

Sunny took the first watch, planning to fit in some sword practice before it was his turn to rest. Going through the motions of the basic kata, he split his mind in two. One part was concentrating on the movements of his body, while the other, smaller part, was observing the surface of the black water through his shadow.

In the absence of wind, the dark circle covering the lower part of the spine was strangely calm. This was his first time seeing the black water without the constant undulation of waves, with its surface strangely flat and absolutely still.

It looked like a giant mirror, one that was made of pure darkness.

It was unnaturally mesmerizing. Suddenly, he felt a strong desire to come closer and take a look at his reflection.

However, Sunny didn't move.

He was terrified of what might look back.

Chapter-61: Sea of Ash

In the morning, Sunny woke up feeling grim and uneasy. The memory of the frightening dark mirror was still fresh in his mind, making every shadow seem sinister and foreboding. He scowled sullenly.

'What the hell. I'm the Child of Shadows. Why do I have to be afraid of my own domain?'

But then again, darkness and shadow were not the same, even if a lot of people tended to mistake one for another. Shadows were born from the absence of light. In a sense, they were manifestations of emptiness. True darkness, on the other hand… true darkness was its own entity.

In a sense, shadows shared more in common with light than they did with darkness.

'I mean… I guess they do. Do they?'

Philosophical debates with his internal monologue were not the best way to start the day, at least as far as Sunny was concerned. His already sour mood only got worse. With a short sigh, he sat up and stretched his arms, yawning.

"Good morning."

The sound of his voice was almost drowned by the echoing noise of rushing water. With the sun rising, the dark sea was in a hurry to retreat. Sunny was finally able to relax a little.

"Morning."

Nephis had been guarding the camp during the latter part of the night, so she was already awake. As usual, she was meditating with her eyes closed — in the absolute darkness of the night, "watching over" something actually meant listening for suspicious sounds, so keeping one's eyes open was not that useful.

For everyone except Sunny, that is, who had perfect night vision thanks to his Attributes.

Hearing him stand up, Changing Star slowly opened her eyes. A soft afterglow left behind by the dancing white flame could still be seen in their depth, quickly disappearing as her sight adjusted to the twilight of dawn. She looked at Sunny and offered him a polite smile.

In the past two weeks, Nephis had also been training, perhaps even more diligently than him. However, she wasn't trying to improve her swordsmanship.

She was actually trying to learn how to behave like a normal human. As the result, their interactions had become slightly less awkward… for the most part.

Sunny was able to recognize Changing Star's efforts because they were very similar to a phase he himself had gone through many years ago. On several occasions, he had caught her intently observing how Cassie talked and behaved around them. Sometime later, Neph would randomly try to mimic small details of her friend's behavior. The results were… a mixed bag, to say the least.

The first time she tried to greet him with a smile in the morning, Sunny panicked and almost summoned the Azure Blade. However, Nephis was very smart and persistent. Today, her polite smile looked almost natural.

He had no idea why Changing Star decided to work on her social skills, of all things, during their perilous journey through the monster-infested hellscape that was the Forgotten Shore. But he didn't mind.

It was actually rather entertaining to watch!

…Watching her torture herself every day, enduring terrible pain in hopes of learning to better control her Aspect Ability, on the contrary, was not fun at all. They never talked about it, but Sunny knew that every time Nephis pretended to meditate, she was actually subjecting herself to the excruciating agony of her Flaw.

When he thought about it, his heart ached. Sunny wasn't used to feeling such things, but he suspected that this was what other people called "compassion". At least it was similar to how it was described in books and dramas.

Not that he knew a lot about that stuff.

After they had breakfast, Nephis stood up and looked at the beam of light falling through the nearest gap between giant vertebrae. Turning to Sunny, she said:

"Let's study the surroundings."

They needed to get the lay of the land and decide on their next step. Usually, that implied looking for the nearest natural features that were high enough to stay above the surface of the sea and deciding on which one they would try to reach next.

Then came a day or two of scouting and hunting, followed by moving the camp to that feature.

Sunny gave her a nod.

"Alright."

He summoned the Echo to guard Cassie while they were away and left the shadow behind to keep an eye out, just in case something happens. Then Sunny followed Nephis to the gap.

Boosting her, he watched as Changing Star flew through the air and then seemingly ran up the wall, kicking herself off at the last moment and propelling her body even higher before grabbing onto a bone protrusion. Relying only on her upper body strength, she then climbed up and disappeared into the cascading light. Soon, the golden rope fell down, allowing him to follow.

Nephis helped him climb atop the gargantuan spine and then straightened, turning to take a look west. Sunny shook his hands and did the same, expecting to see the usual picture — an endless expanse of the crimson labyrinth, dotted here and there with rare high points.

However, what they saw left them both speechless.

Some distance away, the labyrinth seemed to lose color. The crimson blades of coral stood grey and misshapen, as though struck by some unknown disease and drained of all life. The stone-like material looked brittle and fragile, ready to crumble to dust at any moment.

The patch of dead coral spread for as far as the eye could see. Further away, the walls of the labyrinth seemed to have collapsed into a sea of ash-grey sand. This ashen wasteland looked so alien and strange after weeks of seeing only the endless crimson pathways that Sunny felt a shiver run down his spine.

The fact that they didn't notice even a single monster moving through the mud beneath made him feel even more disturbed.

There was only one visible high point to the west of them. Far away into the distance, the ground rose, forming a tall hill. The hill was probably the largest they had seen, easily capable of becoming a real island once the water rose in the night. Its shape reminded Sunny of a colossal barrow.

Covered in the grey sand left behind by dead coral, the hill resembled a mountain of ash. That mountain was crowned by a giant tree.

The tree rose into the sky like a tower, its branches wide enough to cover the whole island in their shade. The bark of the giant tree was as black as the water of the dark sea, while its leaves were red as blood.

Contrasted against the grey sky, the crimson crown of the majestic tree looked incredibly vibrant and magnificent.

Sunny gulped.

"What… the hell… is that?"

Nephis was either thinking or had nothing to say. She just stared into the distance, a slight frown on her face.

At that moment, something glistened brightly from beneath the tree. The glimmer was clear and easily visible even from their position, like a beam of sunlight reflected by a large mirror. A moment later, it was gone, only to appear again after a few seconds.

'A mirror…'

Sunny shivered, remembering the previous night. For some reason, the bright glimmer suddenly seemed to become menacing.

After some time had passed, he addressed Neph again:

"What do you think?"

She lingered a bit before turning to him. While Changing Star was deliberating on what to say, he glanced at the ashen wasteland again. Finally, she spoke:

"This is the only way west."

Sunny grimaced and looked away.

He didn't like this turn of events one bit.

"So, we are going?"

Nephis turned to face the giant tree and, as though affected by its grandeur, hesitantly shrugged.

"Do we have a choice?"

***

Some time later, they abandoned the remains of the giant sea monster and moved west, planning to check the situation inside the wasteland that lay between them and the Ashen Barrow.

Initially, they weren't planning to approach the strange island. However, things turned out to be rather unusual once they entered the wasteland.

With grey sand under their feet and dead coral walls surrounding them, the group was fully prepared to face unknown danger. Despite the fact that they had not seen any monster moving through this area from the top of the leviathan's spine, neither Sunny nor Nephis truly believed that no one was going to attack them in this strange region of the labyrinth.

There were too many ways for the Nightmare Creatures to hide themselves, and if there was one thing the Sleepers had learned during their time on the Forgotten Shore, it was that everything here was either deadly or concealing something capable of killing them. In that regard, their first encounter with the carnivorous worms was especially traumatic.

However, their common sense turned out to be wrong this time around. The wasteland was quiet and empty, completely void of any signs of life. The absence of monsters was, in theory, supposed to make Sunny feel better, but he felt even more nervous than usual instead.

This whole situation reeked of danger. It was strange and unnatural.

If even the monsters were afraid to approach this place, what were they doing walking deeper and deeper into the wasteland of their own free will?

Were they fools not to turn around and run away immediately?

Soon, they reached the point where the walls of the labyrinth had crumbled into dust. Now, there was nothing but a vast expanse of grey sand between them and the hill

crowned by the giant tree.

Nothing could hide on that ashen flat.

However, they would also be unable to conceal themselves from anyone's gaze.

Sunny glanced at Nephis.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Changing Star scowled and lowered her chin. Then, looking forward, she scowled and said:

"Let's go."

Chapter-62: Hide and Seek

As soon as they left the familiar confines of the labyrinth and stepped into the vast expanse of the ashen wasteland, Sunny felt strangely uncomfortable. It was as though he had unknowingly turned slightly agoraphobic while traveling through the complicated madness of the crimson maze.

He had grown accustomed to being surrounded by tall walls of coral, with endless tangled paths stretching in all directions for as far as he could see. Despite the fact that the labyrinth was hiding numerous dangers, it also offered a strange sort of safety.

At least in the case of Sunny, who had the advantage of being able to see beyond its twists and turns thanks to his stealthy Shadow Scout.

Now, with grey sand beneath and nothing to break the line of sight, he had lost that advantage. The idea of not being able to hide from the enemy made him feel naked.

'Keep cool. There's no one here.'

That thought, which was supposed to calm him down, had the opposite effect instead. Indeed, there were no Nightmare Creatures anywhere in the desolate wasteland… but why was that?

What made them so eager to avoid this place?

Nephis was walking in the front of the group, with Sunny right behind her. The Echo was in the rear, moving at a slow pace. He looked around and, after a bit of hesitation, said in a low voice:

"I don't like this."

Nephis glanced at him with her usual indifferent expression. Turning away, she simply said:

"Stay alert."

They continued forward in silence, sand squeaking under their feet. A dozen or so minutes later, Changing Star raised her hand, gesturing them to stop. Turning to Sunny, she asked:

"Has your shadow noticed anything?"

He shook his head.

"No. There are some irregularities here and there, like small knolls or shallow pits, but nothing is moving. Mostly, it just seems flat and lifeless."

He turned to Cassie and asked hesitantly:

"Do you hear anything?"

In some cases, her keen hearing was more effective than his shadow sense. When they were caught by the storm, Cassie had been able to sense that something was wrong long before her seeing companions noticed anything.

However, this time it was of no use. She simply shook her head, indicating that there were no unusual sounds around them.

Nephis sighed and lowered her head, thinking. Then she cast a gaze at the distant Ashen Barrow.

"Let's continue."

However, she did change the direction of the group slightly, aiming to approach one of the knolls that Sunny had noticed.

By the time they approached it, it was already noon. The sun was right above their heads, making their shadows small and shapeless. Sunny's own shadow had returned and was now hiding beneath his feet, looking like a formless blob of darkness.

This time of day was its least favorite.

Nephis summoned her sword and slowly approached the knoll, trying to determine its nature. There was nothing remarkable about it except for the fact that everything around was flat, and it was not. The knoll was about as tall as Sunny, somewhat oblong and covered in the same grey sand as the rest of the wasteland.

It didn't seem dangerous, but there was no harm in checking… well, most likely. Maybe it could provide them with some useful information.

Just as Changing Star was about to stretch her hand and touch the surface of the knoll, Sunny's shadow suddenly noticed something moving in the distance, back at the edges of the labyrinth where they had come from.

Acting on instinct, Sunny jumped toward the Echo and hissed to Neph:

"Hide!"

At the same time, he dismissed the hulking scavenger. Suddenly losing her mount, Cassie flung her hands up and fell. Catching her in the princess carry, Sunny darted toward the knoll and lowered himself to the ground, placing the blind girl between himself and crouching Nephis.

Changing Star put one hand on Cassie's shoulder and looked at him with a silent question in her eyes.

"Danger?"

Sunny raised one hand with his palm open, telling her to wait. His shadow was already peeking from behind the knoll, carefully observing the source of the movement.

Already some distance away, the dead walls of the labyrinth rose from the grey sand. Suddenly, one of them collapsed, knocked over by a massive figure. Surrounded by the cloud of ashen sand, the figure moved forward, stepping onto the flat surface of the wasteland.

Eight legs, two terrifying bone scythes, black and crimson carapace that looked like ancient armor that had been splattered with blood… another centurion.

Sunny silently cursed.

They fought these monsters twice before, and won both times. However, that was because each battlefield had been carefully prepared to stack advantages in their favor, with plenty of planning and devious scheming on their part.

He wasn't sure that they would be able to kill one in a direct confrontation, at least not without suffering serious damage.

Turning to Nephis, Sunny whispered:

"A carapace centurion had just walked out of the labyrinth."

She scowled. Cassie, meanwhile, lightly touched his hand and asked:

"Where is it heading?"

Sunny blinked, then concentrated on the shadow's vision. Soon, he exhaled with some relief.

"Looks like it's heading for the Ashen Barrow. If we stay hidden behind this knoll and it doesn't change course, there's a high chance that it won't notice us."

Changing Star thought for a second and then nodded.

"Keep an eye on it and tell me as soon as something changes."

Trying to become as small and silent as possible, the three of them pressed their bodies to the knoll. There wasn't a lot of space to hide, so they had to endure being cramped against each other.

Well… maybe "endure" was not the right word. Sunny might have even enjoyed the situation in other circumstances…

'What are you thinking about, fool?! Concentrate on the deadly monster!' he thought angrily, berating himself.

But it was so hard to concentrate with Cassie's soft body pressed against his…

'DEADLY! MONSTER!'

Finally able to get his mind out of the gutter, Sunny sighed and focused on observing the centurion.

The hulking creature was moving through the wasteland, slowly drawing closer. Soon, he was able to see every crimson line and every spike on its weathered carapace. However, his eyes were glued to something else.

Cautiously held between the centurion's scythes, a beautiful crystal was gleaming with hypnotic inner light. It was bright and strangely alluring.

A transcendent soul shard.

They had already seen a similar scene, back when a pair of centurions were retrieving two of such crystals from the remains of the giant shark-like creature.

'So that was their destination.'

Sunny glanced at the magnificent tree standing atop the Ashen Barrow. With its onyx branches and vibrant scarlet leaves, it looked striking and majestic.

Like something holy hidden in the depths of hell.

He shared his findings with the group, careful to keep his whisper as quiet as possible.

The centurion was about to walk past their hiding spot. Despite the fact that there was some distance between its path and the knoll, Sunny was still nervous. This was the most dangerous moment.

The monster came level with the knoll, then proceeded forward without blinking an eye.

He exhaled.

"It's walking toward the Barrow."

Nephis did not relax, still ready for things to go south at any moment.

"Follow it."

Sunny nodded. A moment later, his shadow slid from behind the knoll, sneakily pursuing the Nightmare Creature. With how much the range of Shadow Control had improved, he was pretty sure of his ability to tail it to the footsteps of the ashen hill.

The centurion crossed the wasteland with the transcended shard clasped tightly between its scythes. Its bearing was somewhat strange, seeming almost… pious. It looked like a pilgrim walking toward a mysterious, sacred site.

Soon, it approached the Ashen Barrow and suddenly stopped, as though afraid to cross some invisible line. Then the centurion carefully placed the shard on the sand and backed away from it, its eyes turned to the ground.

After distancing itself from the gleaming crystal, the massive creature… kneeled.

Sunny had to rub his eyes to make sure that he wasn't seeing things.

He wasn't. The carapace centurion bent its eight legs and lowered itself to the ground, submissively placing its terrifying scythes in front of its bowing torso.

Noticing Sunny's strange behavior, Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

He hesitated.

"Wait."

At this moment, his shadow, which was safely hidden some distance away from the kneeling monster, noticed a slight change on the surface of the Ashen Barrow.

The bright glimmer they had seen from the top of the leviathan's spine was back. Only this time, it was even more blinding.

The glimmer rose into the air from the shadows cast by the branches of the towering tree and moved, slowly approaching the footsteps of the hill.

When Sunny was finally able to discern the source of the shining, his eyes widened.

Feeling a cold shiver running down his spine, he forgot to breathe.

Chapter-63: Lord of Ashes

Moving through the ashen sand and piles of fallen leaves, a giant monster was coming down the hill.

Sunny gulped, his expression turning dark.

The creature was as large as a house, with its eight segmented legs resembling tall pillars. Its form was similar to that of scavengers and centurions, comprised of a crab-like carapace and a protruding, somewhat humanoid torso. However, this was where the similarities between them ended.

Instead of chitin, the behemoth's shell was seemingly made out of polished, lustrous metal. It was as though its whole body had been once submerged into a crucible of molten steel, emerging from it encased in an impenetrable suit of shining armor.

Beams of sunlight were reflecting from the chrome surface of the carapace, creating the bright glimmer Sunny had noticed. Massive but strangely elegant, the steel monster resembled a giant knight. Sunny was ready to swear that he had noticed the shapes of seven stars carved into its chest.

However, that knight was corrupted and evil. It radiated a sinister aura, like a demon summoned from hell to sow death and slaughter. The polished armor of the creature was covered with long, jagged spikes. Its humanoid torso had four mighty arms, two ending with powerful pincers, the other two — with razor-sharp, terrifying scythes.

The demon's head was more pronounced than that of a scavenger and crowned with several tall, sharp horns. Its metal face was almost human-like, but simultaneously repulsively monstrous and bestial. Just looking at it made Sunny's skin crawl.

'That thing… is scary.'

Whatever that creature was, its rank within the carapace legion was clearly higher than that of a centurion, not to mention of a lowly scavenger. It was the next step in their evolution. A general or a commander, perhaps. What were they called… legates? Praetorians?

Holding his breath, Sunny watched as the Carapace Demon descended from the Ashen Barrow. Stopping in front of the transcendent soul shard, it looked briefly at the kneeling centurion.

The deadly awakened monster shrank under its gaze, as if terrified of the larger Nightmare Creature. Sunny knew how it felt, since he did the same when the behemoth's eyes had briefly glided past his shadow's hiding place.

Not paying the centurion any attention, the Carapace Demon picked up the gleaming crystal and turned around. Then, it unhurriedly returned to the shade of the giant tree's branches.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

"Sunny? What is happening?"

He looked at Cassie, whose face was full of worry and curiosity. After hesitating for a little while, he said:

"There's a new threat. Stay quiet a bit longer, I'll explain later."

Back at the footsteps of the tall hill, the carapace centurion was finally ready to stand up again. Sunny was in a dilemma. He had to follow the monster to make sure that it doesn't stumble on their hiding place on its way back to the labyrinth.

However, he was also extremely curious to see what the Carapace Demon was up to in its lair on the top of the Ashen Barrow.

There was no time to think things through properly.

Making a hasty decision, Sunny sent his shadow sliding over the grey sand. It masterfully avoided the carapace centurion's eyes and was already climbing the tall hill a few seconds later.

'One look. I'll just take one look.'

Hiding in the deep shade cast by the majestic tree's scarlet crown, the shadow glided up the slope and approached the place where the Carapace Demon had disappeared from its sight.

On top of the hill, the ground was covered with fallen leaves. The Ashen Barrow was indeed larger than any high natural feature they had encountered before, vast and

spacious as an actual island. However, the traces left behind by the massive creature's pillar-like legs could be easily seen.

They led the shadow to the center of the island, where the obsidian tree's enormous trunk was rising from the ground, with its broad roots stretching in all directions.

The Carapace Demon was standing beneath the tree, looking up at its lower branches. The transcendent shard was still clenched in its pincer.

'What is it looking at?'

Sunny made the shadow trace the creature's gaze and noticed several round, appetizing fruits hanging between the scarlet leaves. One of them looked especially ripe.

Suddenly, the demon dropped the soul shard into the sand and, completely forgetting about it, raised its body. It stretched a pincer up and gently grasped the fruit, then pulled on it.

Without any resistance, the fruit tore off the branch. Holding it as something fragile and extremely precious, the massive creature slowly lowered itself to the ground. Then, it carefully brought the fruit to its mouth and took a small bite.

'Its… eating fruits? This abomination is vegetarian?!'

Bewildered and not quite sure of what he had just seen, Sunny had no choice but to command his shadow to leave and hurry to the base of the hill. The time was up, and if he wanted to catch up with the carapace centurion, he had to act with haste.

Gliding over the fallen leaves, the shadow descended from the Ashen Barrow and flew back in the direction of the labyrinth, soon catching up with the retreating monster.

'Phew.'

Feeling a lot of relief, Sunny made sure that the centurion's route would not put him on the collision course with the knoll they had been hiding behind and finally allowed himself to relax... slightly.

He waited until the scythe-wielding monster was completely gone before slowly rising back to his feet.

"It's safe to come out now."

Nephis and Cassie stood up, stretching and massaging their limbs. Suddenly remembering how tightly they were pressed against each other while hiding behind the knoll, Sunny just barely avoided turning red with embarrassment.

'That's… uh… was a necessary measure!'

He was almost glad that the Carapace Demon had appeared at the perfect moment to take his thought away from that situation.

"What happened?"

Nephis looked at him and raised an eyebrow. For once, her expression of indifference did not look very convincing.

Sunny glanced at the not-so-distant Ashen Barrow and shivered.

"There's danger ahead. We need to return to the Bone Ridge. I'll explain everything once we're safe and sound, back at the camp."

She opened her mouth to say something, but then thought better of it and remained silent, simply giving him a nod. The trust they had built was enough for that much, at least.

Sunny summoned the Echo, tied the golden rope around its torso, placed Cassie's makeshift saddle back on its carapace and helped the blind girl climb to her seat.

Picking up the saddlebags, he fixed them back onto the scavenger and took a step away. They were ready to go.

Before that, however, Sunny had one more thing to do. Coming close to the knoll, he used his hands to brush the sand off its surface.

Soon, the onyx black surface was revealed beneath. It was the same exact color as the bark of the colossal tree growing from the center of the Ashen Barrow.

The knoll was, in fact, just a small portion of one of the tree's giant roots, raised slightly above the ground in this part of the wasteland.

Sunny looked around, trying to calculate the size of this sea of ash. Finally, he was starting to understand what had drained all life from the giant patch of the crimson labyrinth.

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Back inside the Bone Ridge, they were sitting around the fire. The delicious smell of roasting meat filled the air, making Sunny's stomach produce embarrassing sounds. However, it wasn't time to eat yet. He was in the middle of telling the girls about what he had seen.

"... after the centurion kneeled, another carapace creature came from the top of the Ashen Barrow. Only this one was not one of those we had seen before. It was easily twice the size of the centurion, six or seven meters tall. I can't even imagine how much it weighs. It looked like a moving house."

Nephis frowned, clearly not happy to know that there was such a behemoth barring their way.

"What's more, its carapace is not made of chitin. Instead, it looks like some strange metal alloy. I don't think we'll be able to cut through it. I also didn't notice any gaps in that monstrosity's armor, not even around the joints."

Cassie gulped, turning her head to her friend. Changing Star, however, remained silent.

Sunny sighed.

"In addition, that thing has four arms instead of the usual two, a pair with pincers and a pair with scythes. They're even bigger than the centurion's. Its carapace is littered with spikes, and it has long horns on its head. It also looks… uh… more human-like. It almost got a face, albeit an extremely ugly one. And its eyes… well, I think that it is more sentient than anything we had faced before."

Nephis was thoughtful. After a while, she said:

"It is probably an awakened demon."

Nightmare Creatures with one soul core were called "beasts", the ones with two cores were called "monsters". Three cores belonged to a class of creatures known as "demons", with "devils" right above them with four cores.

Sunny gave her a nod, indicating that he was in agreement with her conclusion.

"Or maybe a devil. In any case, I think we should avoid that scary bastard at all cost."

Changing Star stared at him, tilting her head a little. For a minute or so, there was only silence.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then sighed, then blinked a couple of times. Finally, he gave her a doomed, crooked smile.

"Let me guess. You want to kill it..."

Chapter-64: Pursued by Demons

"Let me guess. You want to kill it…"

Nephis continued to stare at him with her usual unreadable expression. After a while, Sunny chuckled and shook his head in disbelief.

"You really are crazy. That's… that's an awakened demon we're talking about, remember? Have you forgotten that we're just Sleepers?"

Then he frowned and scratched his head.

"W—wait a second. I feel like we already had this conversation before. Doesn't it feel familiar?"

Cassie turned to face the two of them and politely cleared her throat.

"Actually, you had said pretty much the exact same thing right before we decided to attack that first carapace centurion."

Sunny beamed.

"Yes! Exactly! And how did that end up? I almost got killed!"

Nephis shrugged indifferently.

"You survived, didn't you?"

He froze with his mouth open, too flabbergasted by the sheer audacity of her remark to answer immediately. A few seconds later, Sunny was finally able to speak again.

"That's not the point!"

Cassie gently touched her friend on the shoulder and whispered.

"Neph! That's not a very nice thing to say."

Changing Star's face flushed a little. Glancing aside, she hesitated and said:

"What I meant to say is… uh… we've won in the end, didn't we? It was a risk we had to take, and it paid off. We've grown stronger since then."

Sunny had a feeling that the fight against the Carapace Demon was already inevitable, but couldn't bring himself to stop protesting, solely out of principle.

"But that thing… it's huge! It's so tall you won't even be able to poke it with your sword! What are we going to do, ask the bastard politely to lower itself to our level?"

Neph frowned and looked at him with displeasure.

"It's just an…"

"...awakened demon, I know!"

Sunny sighed and shook his head again, feeling like he was talking to a stone wall.

Changing Star's mind was still a mystery to him. He had realized a long time ago that there was a deep dark well hidden behind her seemingly radiant exterior. No one pushed themselves that hard, endured that much, went that far unless they were being pursued by demons of their own… he knew that from experience.

And judging by how far ahead of everyone he had ever known Nephis was, her personal demons were especially dreadful. Much more dreadful than the terrifying Carapace Demon, at least. But although Sunny understood that she was running from something, he had no idea what destination she was so desperate to reach.

Just why was she so hellbent on finding that damned human castle, even more so than Sunny himself? His burning desire to come back to reality and rip all the rewards that the world owed him was so intense that it would frighten most people to death. There were very few things that he wasn't willing to do to achieve his dream.

However, it only had meaning for as long as he stayed alive. Nephis, on the other hand, seemed to pursue a goal that held more meaning than her life. Why else would she be so willing to risk it? Sunny just couldn't understand that logic. It was irrational and paradoxical! What can be more important than your life?

If you die, you won't be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor anyway.

He looked Nephis in the eyes and said:

"Back when we agreed to fight the carapace centurion, we did so because there was no other choice. We were literally stuck on a rock with it. What about now? Don't we have a choice to avoid the Ashen Barrow?"

She stared at him for a while and then simply said:

"That's the only way west."

Sunny laughed.

'That is the truth, I'll give you that.'

When his laughter died down, he wiped the corner of his eye and said:

"Alright. Alright. That makes sense. But believe me when I say it, as the only one who actually saw the Carapace Demon… we won't be able to defeat it in a fight."

Nephis scowled.

"Your point?"

Sunny spread his hands.

"Don't misunderstand. Yes, we can't defeat it. But…"

A dark smile appeared on his face.

"That doesn't mean that we can't kill it."

Changing Star thought about it, then raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You have a plan?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Not yet, not entirely. Let me sleep on it. However, there's one thing I know for sure."

He looked west, remembering the Carapace Demon's disturbing, bestial face. In the ensuing silence, Cassie turned her head to face him and asked with curiosity:

"What is it?"

Sunny blinked.

"Ah? Oh, yes. It's pretty simple, really. Unlike the scavengers and centurions, that thing appears to be rather intelligent. Which means that it can be deceived."

***

They spent another uneventful night inside the dead leviathan's spine. As far as their camps went, this one was probably the safest. There was a certain comfort in being surrounded by walls from all sides, even if they were made out of bone. Sleeping on top of cliffs and coral mounds, just meters away from the surface of the dark sea, exposed to elements, was not very restful.

Sunny even entertained the thought of suggesting to Nephis that they should stay here for a while, a few weeks, or even months if needed. They could slowly explore the surrounding areas, hunt monsters and grow stronger.

Then, after absorbing hundreds of soul shards and shadow fragments, armed with dozens of Memories and even a few more Echoes, perhaps, they could attack the Carapace Demon and be more sure of success.

However, he quickly realized that it was a bad idea. The Forgotten Shore was perilous and unpredictable. They were rather successful in conquering its dangers so far, but it was too easy for the situation to change. One moment of bad luck was enough to doom them.

One wrong turn, one unfortunate encounter, one more enemy than they were able to handle, and their lives would be over. And that was only in regard to the usual menagerie of abominable horrors they had to fight on the daily basis. The labyrinth hid much more terrifying secrets and existences, not to mention the unimaginable terrors of the deep dark sea.

Every additional day they spent here gave a chance for something fatal and unavoidable to happen. Their best hope of survival was to face the Carapace Demon as soon as possible.

Maybe after defeating it, they would finally be able to see the tall walls of the promised castle.

Sunny tossed and turned the whole night, thinking about the giant creature and trying to give shape to the nascent seed of the idea of how to kill it.

Close to the morning, he was finally able to fall asleep — only to be awakened by Cassie carefully shaking his shoulder half an hour later.

Sunny blinked, looking at the blind girl in confusion.

"What is it?"

She gestured to Nephis, asking her to come closer. Then, a little pale, she gathered her courage and said:

"I had another vision. A vision about the Carapace Demon…"

Chapter-65: Lights in the Darkness

Sunny was instantly wide awake. Sitting up, he hurriedly rubbed his eyes and then glanced at the blind girl, ready to listen.

Nephis approached them and sat down, her face barely visible in the dim light of the early dawn.

"Past or future?"

Sunny blinked.

'Right. I should have asked myself.'

Cassie thought for a bit and then hesitantly answered:

"Past… I think."

After a short pause, her expression changed to that of certainty.

"No, I'm sure of it."

Changing Star slightly tilted her head.

"That's good. So… what did you see?"

Cassie deeply inhaled and fell silent for several seconds, remembering. Her face paled a little, but this time, she was ready to face her fear.

"I saw the Ashen Barrow deep at night, enveloped in a raging storm. The winds were bending the branches of the great tree, as if desperate to break them. The island was illuminated by the constant barrage of thundering lightning bolts, with rain falling from the skies like a flood."

She paused, catching her breath, and continued:

"The Carapace Demon was there, standing in the middle of the storm like an unshakable fortress made of polished steel. Arcs of electricity were dancing between the spikes on his armor, but the demon did not pay it any attention. He was just as Sunny described… prideful, sinister and terrifying."

Cassie closed her eyes.

"When I looked into his eyes, I felt… a sense of emptiness and corruption. He observed the storm until it began to dissipate. The winds weakened, the rain stopped. The great tree stood unbroken, just as magnificent as it was before. But then, the last bolt of lightning fell from the sky and struck the ground beside it."

Sunny was listening to her tale with great attention, hopeful to hear a piece of useful information.

'So, that monstrosity is not afraid of lightning. Shame. With its metal carapace, I was almost tempted to try and lure it from under the tree during a storm.'

Apparently, that wouldn't work.

Meanwhile, Cassie was ready to carry on:

"That bolt of lightning could never hurt the Carapace Demon, let alone the miraculous tree. However, when it hit the ground, it ignited the fallen leaves that cover the Ashen Barrow's surface. Soon, a large part of the island was engulfed in fire. In the absolute darkness of the night, it shone like a beacon."

Sunny perked up, remembering something. Back when the three of them first met at the beginning of their deadly adventure through the Dream Realm, the girls mentioned that the light he had seen from the giant knight's statue a few nights prior was indeed made by them.

However, making that fire had turned out to be a big mistake. At night, any source of light was like a lure for the monsters of the Forgotten Shore… including the terrifying creatures that lurked in the depths of the dark sea. That's why, ever since, they were careful to never light a fire after sunset, preferring to endure the darkness instead of attracting unknown horrors from beneath the waves.

Having a guess of what had happened next in Cassie's vision, he waited for the blind girl to continue. Her voice trembled a little.

"Before the flames died down, the dark sea surged, and a… a thing crawled out of it, covering almost the entire slope of the Ashen Barrow with its body. It looked like a… like a mass of bones and rotten flesh connected by black seaweed, with thousands of horrible eyes staring at me hungrily from beneath, coiling tentacles seething as it pushed itself toward the great tree."

Her face turned slightly green. Just remembering the abomination made Cassie feel nauseated, but she gritted her teeth and did not stop speaking.

"That was the most repulsive creature I've ever seen. However, it seemed slow and clumsy, as though being ashore, outside of the black water, was weakening it. The Carapace Demon did not hesitate to lunge at the creature, completely ignoring the fact that it was at least ten times his size. It was like… like he completely lost his mind, enraged by the intrusion on the island."

Nephis suddenly spoke:

"How did the demon survive?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"I… I don't know. I didn't see the battle itself, only its beginning and its end. At the break of dawn, the Carapace Demon crawled back into the shade of the great tree. He was severely wounded, with several of his legs missing and his scythes covered by a spiderweb of cracks. The fire was gone, and there was no sign of the sea creature anywhere in sight."

She paused for a moment and then said in a quiet voice:

"The most terrible wound was on his chest. The steel armor of the demon was fractured and split apart, revealing the beating heart inside. Rivers of azure blood were flowing from the wound, mixing with the ashen sand. The demon crawled to the base of the tree and laid his broken body between its roots."

Cassie sighed.

"The last thing I saw was the passage of time. I don't know how long it took, but eventually, the Carapace Demon was able to recover from his wounds. His scythes restored themselves, his legs grew back. The fracture on his chest was the last to heal. However, it wasn't healed completely. Hidden from sight, there's still a weakness in his armor."

Both Sunny and Nephis were silent for a long time, thinking.

Changing Star was the first to break the silence.

"So it's not impenetrable after all."

Then she looked at Sunny and asked:

"How's your plan coming along?"

He blinked, extricating himself from the swarm of thoughts. Glancing at his companions, Sunny smiled.

"Pretty well. I already had an inkling of how we should proceed, but Cassie's vision gave me additional inspiration."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Is that so?"

He gave her a confident nod.

"Yeah. It's a wild idea, but it might just work. Well… maybe. In any case, it's going to be risky. And we'll have to make some preparations."

Both Cassie and Nephis looked at him expectantly. The blind girl cautiously asked.

"So… what's your plan? How are we going to deceive the demon?"

Sunny crossed his arms.

"It's not very complicated. Actually, I got the idea from that ancient fellow Neph likes to talk about. We're going to build…"

He took a dramatic pause, and then said with a mysterious smile:

"... a trojan ass."

However, their reaction was not what he had expected. Both girls blinked, then stared at him with complicated expressions. Well, Cassie did not stare, since she was blind, but her face was exactly the same as Changing Star's.

Strange.

"...A what now?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, somewhat embarrassed, and cleared his throat.

"Uh… did I use the wrong word? I thought that Odysseus guy built a wooden animal? A… uh… donkey?"

Nephis raised a hand and put it on her forehead, closing her eyes.

'Weird. Does she have a headache?'

"Uh, are you alright?"

She sighed deeply, then said in a flat tone:

"A horse. It was a horse…"

***

The next day, they returned to the place of the battle between the carapace legion and the centipede monsters. A few days earlier, they had lured a carapace centurion here to ambush it, but ended up causing a massive confrontation between the two tribes of Nightmare Creatures.

The carcasses of some of the monsters were still there, buried slightly in the mud.

Of course, there was no meat left on their skeletons. The inhabitants of the labyrinth were for the most part carrion eaters, after all.

However, the three Sleepers were not interested in meat. They came for something else.

Stopping in front of the centurion's empty shell, cleaned of any flesh by some unknown beasts, he looked at the black and crimson carapace in satisfaction.

Nephis walked over and stood by his side, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Is this what you wanted?"

Sunny smiled.

"Yeah, exactly. I knew that nothing would be insane enough to chew on the chitin, but… in this place, you never know. I wasn't sure about its condition."

But the condition was good.

In fact, it was perfect.

Chapter-66: First Part of the Plan

Close to the evening, with the sun tiredly descending toward the horizon, a strange creature walked out of the colorless remains of the labyrinth. If "walking" was even the right word.

Dragging its legs in the sand, the creature somehow floated forward without moving them. It looked like a carapace centurion, or at least a close approximation of one.

All the necessary parts were in place. The creature had a black carapace with a menacing crimson pattern on it, a humanoid torso, eight segmented legs and two arms ending with formidable bone scythes. However, all these parts looked mismatched and strange, as though put together by some clumsy sculptor.

Additionally, the centurion moved as if it was seriously drunk.

The carapace was careening to one side, sometimes scraping against the sand. The torso was swinging back and forth for no apparent reason. The scythes were awkwardly lodged behind the creature's back, crossed against each other at a strange angle.

At some point, one of them simply dropped to the ground. The centurion stopped and hesitated for a few seconds, as though unsure what to do. Then it left its scythe arm behind and continued on its way as if nothing had happened.

A perceptive observer would have noticed that the creature seemed to possess two shadows. The first shadow was as one would expect, its shape identical to the creature itself. The second one resembled a human. It briefly showed itself from beneath the larger shadow when the centurion abandoned the runaway limb.

The human shadow then proceeded to facepalm and shake its head in utter contempt.

The whole situation was nothing short of being completely bizarre. But, for better or worse, there was nobody around to notice the weird creature.

Unobstructed, it traversed the wasteland, moving in the direction of the Ashen Barrow. Soon, it was almost at the footstep of the tall hill.

The sunset was approaching.

***

The strange centurion plopped on the ground at the base of the Ashen Barrow and stopped moving completely. Awkward and lopsided, it looked like a parody of the other monster of its kind who had kneeled gracefully at the same spot a few days prior.

Additionally, it arrived without a tribute. There was no transcendent soul shard in sight. Added to the disrespectful pose, this transgression was more than enough to get the centurion killed.

Perhaps… it was suicidal.

On top of the barrow, the Carapace Demon moved and rose from the ashen sand. His shining armor glistened, reflecting the light of the setting sun. Encased in bright metal, with a crown of horns adorning his head, the demon looked fearsome and sinister. Gazing down, he lingered for a few moments.

Two dark scarlet embers ignited in the depths of the demon's eyes. Shifting his terrifying scythes, the giant monster walked forward, slowly descending from the hill to face the strange visitor.

The ground shook as he approached. However, the bizarre centurion did not even flinch. In fact, it remained completely motionless.

The Carapace Demon stopped some distance away from the suspicious creature. He observed it, clearly understanding that its pathetic appearance might be a trap. The labyrinth was full of unimaginable dangers. Rashly approaching an unknown foe was not something an awakened demon, who possessed his own form of intelligence, would do.

At least that was what the three Sleepers had assumed.

However, they were wrong.

Just a second later, the Carapace Demon lunged forward. Its scythe flashed through the air, severing the centurion's torso in half. The adamantine chitin was cut apart as though it was made of butter. The upper half of the monster's torso flew off, revealing… only emptiness inside.

…On the other side of the Ashen Barrow, Sunny, who was running up the slope with all his might, cursed under his breath.

That was too soon!

He thought that they would have more time. Who knew that the Carapace Demon would turn out to be such a daredevil? He didn't even hesitate before going all out!

With Cassie riding piggyback on his back, Sunny gritted his teeth and tried to run even faster.

It was time to switch to plan B…

A moment later, the weird centurion's carapace came apart, setting the Echo that had been hiding underneath it free. Pushing the pieces of chitin away with its powerful pincers, the scavenger rushed toward the towering demon. It was aiming to duck underneath it and, hopefully, mess up the giant's legs.

The first part of Sunny's plan was rather simple. They were going to use the remains of a dead carapace centurion to disguise the Echo, which was much smaller in comparison, as one of the officers of the carapace legion.

Then, they would send it to the base of the Ashen Barrow to lure the demon away. The three of them were going to circle the hill and hide themselves under the grey sand in advance, then run up the slope and to the center of the island as soon as the demon had left.

The Echo was supposed to buy them enough time to climb the great tree and conceal themselves in its branches. Then, Sunny would dismiss the Echo, thus finishing the first stage of the plan. He never intended for the scavenger to actually fight the fearsome demon!

However, the Carapace Demon's unusually swift act of aggression had messed up the timing of the whole thing. The decoy was already destroyed, yet they weren't even halfway to the tree.

In this situation, there was no choice but to order the Echo to attack, hoping that it could stall the giant monster. That way, of course, Sunny was putting his scavenger at risk…

But there was no other choice.

Just as he was about to reach the crest of the hill, the Echo tried to hide itself beneath the Carapace Demon's massive body. It was doing the same thing that Nephis had done when fighting the first carapace centurion, intending to use the size of the enemy against it.

The difference was that this time, the smaller participant of the fight was clad in a sturdy carapace, as opposed to a squishy human girl who had no protection. Even if the demon tried to crush the scavenger with its weight, it wouldn't be able to kill it.

However, the demon understood it too.

Moving with incredible speed, he shifted his torso and struck out with a pincer. The scavenger was swatted away like an irritating insect, flying through the air and heavily crashing onto the ground. Its carapace had almost cracked.

Running toward the great tree, Sunny grimaced. He wanted to dismiss the Echo, but knew that it was too soon. They needed more time…

Ahead of him, Nephis was already approaching the enormous black trunk. Not wasting any time, she removed the seaweed rucksack from her back, gently laid it on the ground, and began climbing, grabbing onto the cracks of the onyx bark.

Meanwhile, the Echo was shakily rising to its legs. A stubborn light was burning in its eyes. Producing a loud screech, it clacked its pincers in the air and once again rushed toward the demon.

'Go get him, buddy!' Sunny screamed inwardly, wishing his scavenger luck with all his heart.

The smaller creature bravely ran toward the steel behemoth, raising its pincers to attack. It was followed by two shadows — one bestial, the other one human.

Sunny was quickly shortening the distance to the great tree…

Below the hill, the Carapace Demon calmly stepped toward the rushing enemy. Its four arms moved in unison.

Suddenly, the scavenger's arms were sliced off. Its body was gripped in two giant pincers and raised into the air.

Sunny didn't even have time to react.

A fraction of a second later, the demon slightly strained its arms and tore the Echo in two, separating its torso from the carapace and crushing both halves into a bloody pulp.

On top of the hill, Sunny stumbled.

The familiar voice resounded like a tolling bell in his ears.

[Your Echo has been destroyed…]

Chapter-67: Racing Against Time

[Your Echo has been destroyed.]

Sunny stumbled and almost fell. Cassie gripped his shoulders tightly and leaned back a little, trying to help him keep balance. With fallen leaves flying from under his feet, Sunny somehow managed to catch himself in time.

'No!'

Anger and regret clouded his mind, but it was too late to do anything. His trusty scavenger was dead, sliced and torn apart by the giant creature. The ease and brutality with which the Carapace Demon had decimated the poor, brave beast would have been insulting... if it wasn't so terrifying.

It only took him a split second.

The Echo was gone. Not only had Sunny seen its tragic end through the eyes of his shadow, he also felt the subtle connection between them disappear. In his Soul Sea, one of the spheres of light shimmered and vanished, leaving the silent surface of the water a little bit darker. He had lost his most valuable possession.

But the bitterness Sunny felt was not only because of how useful the Echo had been, or how much money it could have brought him in the real world. He had actually grown to like the mindless scavenger quite a bit. It was big, loyal and reliable.

It even seemed to possess a strange sort of stubborn, offputting personality.

And now it was dead.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny ran like a madman. There would be time to mourn the loss of the loyal Echo later.

Right now, they had bigger problems.

"Sunny? What happened?"

Cassie's whisper sounded worried and tense. She must have felt the change in his mood through his posture and body language.

To be completely honest, Sunny was in no shape to talk. Running up the hill at top speed, with the blind girl on his back — no matter how delicate and light she was — had been a tall task for him without the support of the shadow. He was struggling to breathe, and there was still a considerable distance to the great tree. However, Sunny had to answer, his voice hoarse and rugged:

"He killed the Echo."

Then, there was no time for words anymore.

Because things were turning from bad to worse.

Down at the bottom of the hill, the Carapace Demon was standing above the mutilated remains of the scavenger, looking at them with contempt. Heavy drops of azure blood were falling from each of his four upper limbs.

Suddenly, the corpse of the Echo began to shine with soft light. Then, it shimmered and dissolved into a river of tiny sparks, which then fell to the ground and disappeared, leaving no trace of the hulking scavenger behind. Even its blood on the demon's scythes and pincers was gone.

After all, the Echo was just a manifestation of a slain Nightmare Creature and not the real thing. It came from nothing and was now returned to the state of nothingness.

However, the Carapace Demon was not looking at the unexpected light show. Instead, he was staring at one particular spot on the ground.

There, a lonely human shadow was frozen in confusion, uncertain what to do. With the body of the Echo — and consequently, its spacious shadow — gone, it was instantly revealed and had nowhere else to hide.

'Crap!'

The demon tilted his head, then moved with the speed of lightning and pierced the shadow with a scythe.

Sunny flinched, ready to experience blinding pain…

But nothing happened. The shadow, which had raised its hands in fright, looked down at the massive blade protruding from its chest and scratched its head.

It was completely fine.

Well, of course… it was just a shadow, after all. One had to have a body to be susceptible to such attacks.

'Right. What else did I think would happen?'

Meanwhile, the demon was staring at the nonchalant shadow. The menacing scarlet light in his eyes blazed brighter.

Sunny was getting closer to the trunk of the tree, temporarily fueled by adrenalin. Otherwise, he might have fainted from the strain already.

'Just… a little… more!'

They had every chance of making it. The shadow just had to distract the giant monster for a bit…

But it seemed as though luck was not on his side today. Down below, the Carapace Demon retrieved his scythe. However, instead of attacking the human shadow again, it suddenly turned around and cast a dark look at the top of the Ashen Barrow, where the giant tree stood in all its magnificent beauty.

The bastard was smart after all.

'Curse it all!'

Forgetting about the shadow, the behemoth lunged forward, rushing back up the tall hill's slope. It moved with frightening speed, covering a dozen meters with each second.

'Get back here!' Sunny screamed to his shadow as he approached the trunk of the tree.

Helping Cassie climb down from his back, Sunny picked up the rucksack that Nephis had left behind and handed it to the blind girl.

"Be gentle with that."

Cassie nodded, well aware of the contents of the rucksack, and carefully hung it on her shoulder.

At that time, Changing Star had already reached the lowest branches of the great tree. Not wasting any time, she moved to a spot above her companions, summoned the golden rope and threw one of its ends down.

Catching the rope, Sunny quickly tied a loop and handed it to Cassie.

"You go up first."

The blind girl hesitated for a moment, then accepted it. Just as she was about to put her foot inside the loop, Sunny suddenly stopped her.

"Wait! Summon your staff."

The wooden staff that Cassie used to walk was actually a magical item capable of summoning strong winds. In their travels, they rarely had a cause to use it. But now it could come in handy.

Surprised and unsure of the reason, she nevertheless did as he had asked, summoning the Memory from her Sea of Soul. The wooden staff appeared in her hand.

Sunny lightly hugged the blind girl from behind and turned her body, guiding the hand holding the staff in the necessary direction. Then, he said:

"Now summon the wind."

In the next moment, a strong gale rose around them, blasting fallen leaves and ashen sand into the air. Instantly, a large portion of the island's surface was stripped bare.

More sand was revealed beneath.

Meanwhile, the shadow was racing against the Carapace Demon. The massive creature was already halfway up the hill, moving with the speed of a rushing train. The nimble shadow, however, was even faster. It had already overtaken the behemoth and was now flying forward, hurrying to return to its master.

"Good, now go!"

Sunny helped Cassie put her foot into the loop and stepped back, watching as Nephis pulled the rope up. She was going as fast as she could — which was really fast by human standards.

But was it fast enough?

Sweating, he counted seconds and waited. His life now depended on whether or not the rope would return before the demon arrives.

Every moment felt like an eternity.

He could already hear the distant, but quickly approaching sound of the Carapace Demon's eight towering legs stomping furiously through the sand.

Finally, Cassie was at the level of the giant tree's lower branches. Nephis helped her step out of the loop and settle on the wide surface of the branch, then threw the rope down again.

The demon was approaching the tree, still hidden from sight by its massive trunk.

The shadow slipped beneath Sunny's feet and wrapped itself around his body.

Catching the rope, Sunny practically flew up, climbing with incredible, adrenaline-fuelled speed. Landing on the branch beside the girls, he quickly turned around and tried to pull the rope up. The monster could not notice the golden shine of it… otherwise, it all would have been for nothing.

But there was less than a second left…

'Oh no!' Sunny thought, his heart skipping a beat.

But then Nephis simply dismissed the Memory, making the golden rope disappear into thin air.

The three of them crouched, hiding from sight, and held their breaths.

… A moment later, the furious mass of spikes and polished metal appeared beneath them. The Carapace Demon abruptly stopped, gazing around with his burning scarlet eyes. His pincers clicked, as if thirsty to tear flesh apart. The terrifying scythes were raised into the air, ready to slash and sever.

But there was nothing to kill underneath the great tree.

The demon lingered, looking right and left. Then he raised his head and looked up. Thankfully, the branch the three Sleepers were hiding on was very wide, more than enough to hide them from his sight. They remained motionless and silent, afraid to produce even the smallest of sounds.

After a while, the behemoth finally lowered his gaze and carefully observed the ground, looking for the traces of possible intruders.

However, the ground was clean and bare, all signs of their passage erased by Sunny with the help of Cassie's staff in advance. Not finding anything, the Carapace Demon had no choice but to walk away, moving on to explore other parts of the island.

Sunny was finally able to exhale.

Some distance away, the demon reached the edges of the area affected by the magical gale. There, he finally found two sets of footprints — one left behind by Nephis, the other one by Sunny.

With an angry roar that sounded like the clamor of tearing metal, the giant creature rushed down the slope of the Ashen Barrow, following the footprints to the wasteland beneath.

However, the grey desert was desolate and empty, with no living creature in sight. It was colored crimson by the setting sun.

At that moment, the ground shook slightly, and a thunderous rumble resounded throughout the labyrinth, bringing with it chilling wind and the smell of salt.

The dark sea was returning.

Throwing one last hateful gaze toward the wasteland, the Carapace Demon turned around a slowly headed back to the top of his barrow.

Chapter-68: Beacon of Death

Sunny, Nephis and Cassie sat on a branch of the great tree, waiting for the sun to set. The branch was wide enough to accommodate twice as many people, so they weren't worried about being spotted from the ground. Still, they remained silent and motionless, wary of the giant monster that sometimes appeared beneath their hiding place.

The sound of his footsteps sent shivers through the tense bodies of the three Sleepers.

Not once since coming to the Forgotten Shore had Sunny hoped for the night to come faster. But there was a first time for everything.

They could only proceed with the next step of the plan after darkness had fallen, so there was nothing to do now but wait. Sitting with his back against Neph and Cassie, Sunny stared into the distance and tried not to think about anything.

Obsessing over past mistakes and future risks was only going to dampen his resolve. And it was already in short supply.

Meeting a setback so early into the plan really threw Sunny off his game. He still couldn't recover from the sudden loss of the precious Echo. Of course, he knew beforehand that many things could go wrong… in fact, he had even warned the girls that there were too many unpredictable elements, and thus it was impossible to reliably predict their chances of success.

Nevertheless, he had not expected to lose the strongest member of their group at the very beginning. The first stage of the plan was supposed to be the safest. Things to come were going to be much more dangerous.

Sunny looked at the darkening skies, barely visible through the thick canopy of the great tree's crown, and listened to the noise of the rising sea. In the dim twilight, Cassie shifted a little and then gently squeezed his hand.

Her warm touch made Sunny tense up, but then, realizing that the blind girl was just trying to console him, he allowed himself to relax.

'Stupid. What am I, a kid? Holding hands will not solve anything.'

But, despite these grumbling thoughts, Sunny reluctantly realized that he did feel a bit reassured, with no logical reason at all.

Maybe they were going to pull this off after all.

If this was their will… who dared to stop them?

Soon, the night descended, drowning the world in absolute darkness.

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The Ashen Barrow had become an island in the black, undulating void of the dark sea. The braches of the great tree swayed gently in the darkness, their vibrant scarlet leaves now indistinguishable from the obsidian surface of the wood. The leaves whispered and rustled, creating a calming melody in the threatening murmur of the surging waves.

Sunny sighed, knowing that the moment of truth was approaching. He was sure of his plan… as far as it was possible to be sure of anything in this cursed place. But he also knew all the risks and all the things that could go wrong.

At the end of it all, they were still tossing a coin, hoping that its fall was not going to spell their doom.

He felt Neph's position shift. She turned her head and glanced in his direction, a calm expression on her face. Today, her inexplicable ability to remain composed in any situation, no matter how dire, was especially frustrating.

Even though Changing Star could not see anything in the pitch-black darkness of the Starless Void, she knew that he would notice her questioning look.

Sunny closed his eyes, then opened them again and slowly exhaled.

"Let's begin."

The three of them moved, performing a rehearsed set of motions. Cassie carefully shifted to the side, giving Sunny and Nephis space to do what needed to be done. Sunny gently placed the seaweed rucksack between himself and Neph, then opened it.

His motions were slow and cautious.

Inside the rucksack, two large clay containers lay surrounded by several layers of soft seaweed fiber. These jars were made by Sunny himself, and as such were not particularly sturdy. After all, he wasn't a craftsman — all his knowledge about pottery was received in a single day of listening to Teacher Julius's rants about the importance of clay in the development of human civilization.

Still, he at least remembered the basics.

Inside the jars, all the oil they had gathered from the centipede monsters splashed around, making Sunny's heartbeat unsteady. A centipede monster had two sacks in its body, each containing a different oily substance. When mixed, these substances produced an incredibly corrosive, deadly oil that could eat through a scavenger's carapace in seconds.

It was also highly flammable.

The jars contained the two components of the centipede oil. If they were to break during their run to the great tree, allowing the components to mix… well, there was a reason why the rucksack was entrusted to Nephis while Sunny carried Cassie despite his inferior physical endurance.

The centipede oil was the centerpiece of his plan.

Placing the clay jars on the branch, Sunny took out one last thing from the rucksack. It was a makeshift torch made out of bone and… yeah, more seaweed. Traditionally, torches were supposed to be made out of wood, but on the Forbidden Shore, bones were much more easily found than sticks.

In the darkness, he found Neph's cool hand, took it into his own and then placed the torch on her open palm.

At that moment, Sunny couldn't help but remember the other times Changing Star's hands had touched his body. The first time was when he was dying, his chest crushed by the carapace centurion's bone scythe. The other time was on the day he handed her the Starlight Legion Armor and learned about her cruel Flaw.

Both days were very memorable, although for different reasons.

He had a feeling that this day was also going to be forever etched in his memory… provided they live to see the morning.

Sunny deeply inhaled.

"I'm ready."

Nephis nodded and then rose to her feet. Standing tall, she grasped the torch and closed her eyes, as though praying. Clad in white armor, with her silver hair dancing in the wind, she looked like a beautiful, solemn angel.

Then, white radiance ignited beneath her eyelids. In the next moment, bright fire burst from beneath her hands, igniting the top of the torch. Changing Star opened her eyes, extinguishing the light shining in them, and raised the torch high above her head.

In the lightless world, this single small flame looked like a lonely star drowning in the sea of darkness.

Simultaneously, Sunny stepped to the edge of the branch, inhaled deeply… and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"HEY, ASSHOLE! COME GET ME IF YOU DARE!"

Then, all hell broke loose.

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Attracted by the sudden burst of light and Sunny's belligerent cries, the Carapace Demon appeared out of nowhere in a storm of fury. Its towering legs tore through the ashen sand, throwing clouds of it into the air. Two scarlet eyes immediately focused on the shouting human, sending a nervous shiver through Sunny's legs.

"Yeah, right here, you pile of scrap! Come and get it, fat lobster! This is my island now!" he shouted, pretending to not be scared out of his wits.

The demon dashed toward him. This behemoth was as tall as a house, but still not tall enough to reach the branches of the great tree with his scythes. So, for the moment, Sunny was still safe.

He was pretty sure that this won't be the case for long, but it was enough time to bring the plan to fruition.

If he doesn't miss…

Just as the Carapace Demon was about to appear right beneath the branch Sunny was standing on, he took a deep breath, aimed, and tossed both of the jars down.

The creature reacted with lightning speed, slicing both jars into pieces with his horrible scythes. However, it was of no use: the oily liquids contained inside still rained on its carapace in a torrent, followed by a scattering of clay shards.

If anything, it only made the surface of the impact larger, covering most of the demon's metal carapace in a layer of liquid.

The two components mixed, producing the deadly corrosive oil, which then burned into the lustrous armor. Sunny held his breath.

… However, the centipede monster's oil, which was capable of destroying the unbreakable chitin of both scavengers and centurions, turned out to be completely ineffective against the strange alloy covering the Carapace Demon's body. It didn't even leave a scratch on it.

Sunny's face darkened.

'That's…'

Nephis silently appeared by his side, raising an arm.

'... just as I expected.'

Luckily, Sunny did not put a lot of value on the oil's corrosive qualities, to begin with.

He needed the oil for its other quality.

Its flammability.

Guided by the loud sounds produced by the massive monster, Nephis moved and threw the torch down with a powerful swing of her arm. Spinning, the torch streaked through the air like a meteor and landed right in the middle of the demon's carapace.

… In the next second, the giant creature was engulfed in flames.

Sunny did not really expect the fire to be able to damage the demon. He was sure that the behemoth could withstand much more than just simple heat.

But now, covered in the burning oil, the Carapace Demon shined brightly in the pitch-black night of the Forgotten Shore.

He had turned into a fiery beacon, calling all the monsters of the cursed dark sea to come crawling from its black depths.

Chapter-69: The Guest

The giant demon was engulfed in flames, shining like a bright beacon in the hungry darkness of the night. His polished armor blazed with reflected light, sending radiant glints in all directions. Drops of burning oil were falling to the ground, flaring up as they hit the ashen sand.

For a second, it seemed as though time had stopped. Sunny was staring at the incandescent glow of the fire, his eyes wide, almost failing to believe that they had actually pulled this insanity off. Nephis was frozen by his side, her hand still outstretched after the throw.

But they really did, they pulled it off. Sunny never seriously considered facing the Carapace Demon in an honest battle… if a battle between a giant death machine and three powerless humans could even be called honest. However, their lacking strength did not mean that they could not murder the evil creature.

They just had to be smart about how to do it. For example, they could find something stronger to do the dirty work for them…

That's why he had concocted a plan to sneak onto the Ashen Barrow, wait for the night to come, light the behemoth aflame and watch it be torn apart by the terrifying monsters of the dark sea.

And now they were halfway to making that plan a reality.

Of course, the most dangerous part was yet to come — they still had to survive the attack of the creatures of the black water themselves. And before that…

The Carapace Demon roared with fury, making Sunny feel like his ears were going to bleed. The roar sounded like a deafening cacophony of rusted metal being torn apart by giant claws. Two scarlet eyes shone through the conflagration of flames, piercing the young man with a concentrated beam of murderous hatred.

…Before that, they had to last until the sea monsters arrive.

The infuriated demon was out for their blood, and no one knew how much time it would take for the dark sea creatures to appear on the Ashen Barrow. Sunny was scared that the demon was capable of performing ranged attacks. If not, he might be able to climb the tree to get to them, or try to kill them in a way that they had not even considered.

In the worst-case scenario, they would have to endure his rage for quite a while.

Looking into the giant's hateful eyes, he sensed that the creature was thinking in the same direction. When the demon glanced in the direction of the great tree's obsidian trunk, Sunny's heart suddenly skipped a bit.

However, in the end, cold rationality won over seething rage in the Carapace Demon's mind. Instead of wasting time trying to get to the three tiny humans, he suddenly rolled on the ground, hoping to use the sand to douse the flames dancing on his carapace.

The whole island shook, almost throwing Sunny off the branch.

'Crap.'

Why did the bastard have to be so smart?

For a moment, Sunny entertained the idea that the demon was actually going to succeed in extinguishing the fire before the dwellers of the depths had noticed it.

But he didn't have to worry.

Suddenly, Nephis turned to face the dark surface of the sea. Her face paled slightly. Sunny was a second late to react, but almost instantly, he too felt a strange change in the world around them.

It was hard to describe with words. The rustle of the scarlet leaves suddenly felt quieter, the sound of the waves crashing against the shores of the ashen island louder. It was as though some invisible pressure descended on the world, making everything feel slightly different.

Then, the air became colder, and a wall of thick fog appeared above the dark waters.

The Carapace Demon had also noticed this change. He stopped trying to douse the flames and rose from the sand, the oil still burning on his carapace. Not paying it any attention anymore, the demon turned to the sea, a sense of grim resignation radiating from his posture.

Then, it was replaced by dark resolve and frenzied bloodlust.

The fog slowly moved, crawling onto the island. Sunny felt shivers run down his spine, realizing that it was flowing against the wind. The sound of waves was now muffled and changed, almost imperceptibly so.

And there, in the fog, something was moving. He could almost make out a figure.

It was… it was…

Suddenly, Cassie's small palm covered his eyes. With her voice trembling with tension, she whispered:

"Don't look. No matter what happens, don't open your eyes."

Sunny froze, obediently shutting his eyes. A cold sense of fright wrapped itself around his heart. He had never heard the blind girl's voice sound like this before, not even when she was recalling her terrifying visions.

Cassie slowly removed her hand. Blinded, he could only rely on his hearing...

At least that was what he thought until the cold fog touched his skin. Then, in the muffled silence, he heard Cassie's voice again.

Only this time, it was distorted and coming from the wrong direction.

"Don't look… don't look… don't look…"

Sunny gulped, feeling his hair stand on end. The sound of the blind girl's distorted voice echoed in the fog, surrounding him from all sides. Instead of growing quieter, it was becoming louder, overlapping over itself.

"Don't look, don't look, don't look, don't look!"

Then, it grew even louder still and turned into a cacophony of screams, crashing into Sunny like a wave, sounding nothing like what human vocal cords could ever produce:

"DON'T LOOK DON'T LOOK DON'T LOOK DON'T!!!"

Sunny stood paralyzed, stunned by the onslaught of inhuman shrieks. All he could do was try not to fall to his knees. And then, when his resilience was almost broken…

Everything suddenly stopped. The abrupt silence enveloped the world, making him exhale with relief. It was over.

A few seconds later, Cassie whispered into his ear:

"Open your eyes."

After hearing the clear sound of her voice, Sunny was about to do as she told…

Then he stopped.

Her voice did not sound terrifying and distorted. It was just as usual, sweet and melodic. It even came from the right direction. But… but something about it was wrong.

'Wh—what…'

He lingered, keeping his eyes closed.

Why was it so calm? Why didn't he feel the warmth of her breath as she leaned close to whisper into his ear?

And how… how could she lean… if he was taller?

Sunny froze, afraid to even breathe. Cassie's clear, familiar voice repeated:

"Open your eyes… open…"

Then, mere centimeters away, it exploded with cold, malevolent authority:

"OPEN YOUR EYES!"

But he didn't.

A second passed, then another, then one more. Each of them felt like an eternity. Sunny trembled, practically feeling his body aging. Finally, the voice returned. But this time, it felt as though it was further away, withdrawing.

"No matter… no matter…"

Soon, he was able to hear the rustling of leaves and the sound of waves again. He could also hear Cassie and Neph breathing ruggedly beside him. It seemed that they were also assaulted by the terrifying mimic.

And also…

Somewhere beneath them, the Carapace Demon roared and hit his scythes against each other. The loud clamor of steel resounded beneath the great tree, sending an almost palpable wave in all directions. This wave seemed to expel the unnatural fog, creating an enormous sphere of clean air.

Sunny still kept his eyes shut.

In the next moment, the whole island trembled as the demon clashed with the unknown horror that had been hiding in the fog. Something shattered with a deafening thunder, and the ground shook again, causing the branches of the great tree to sway.

With his hands trembling, Sunny outstretched them and grabbed onto his companions, drawing them close. Holding each other, they listened to the sounds of the furious battle and waited.

***

An eternity later, the fight between the Carapace Demon and the guest from the depths was over. Silence had returned to the Ashen Barrow once again.

Sunny had long ago lost the track of time and grew desensitized to the tremors running through the great tree each time the two monsters clashed. Sudden stillness gave him a start. With a slight shudder, he turned his head and listened, trying to discern what was happening.

In the quiet aftermath of the terrible battle, Nephis hesitated and then said in a raspy voice:

"We can open our eyes now."

Sunny lingered before following her advice. He opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times, his vision slowly returning.

The pale light of dawn was creeping from the east, enveloping the island in the dim twilight. Beneath them, the surface of the island was torn apart and upturned, almost unrecognizable. It was as though the Ashen Barrow was pummeled by several rounds of heavy artillery fire.

And on that surface…

'Damn it!'

The Carapace Demon was slowly limping back from the edges of the island, leaving a trail of azure blood behind. He was heavily wounded and in a terrible shape, with several limbs missing and a spiderweb of cracks covering his once pristine carapace.

Two of his arms were gone, leaving him with a single scythe and a single pincer. Most of his rear legs were either broken or severed, forcing the behemoth to walk in a strange, unsteady gait.

However, he was still alive. More than that, none of the armor plates covering his vital organs were seriously damaged, his metal shell still strong and impenetrable.

Sunny clenched his fists and glanced at Neph, a dark expression on his face.

"What… what do we do?"

Changing Star looked down. There was a cold glint in her calm, grey eyes.

Stretching her arm to the side, she summoned her sword and said:

"Finish him off."

Chapter-70: Judgement of the Blade

Sunny looked at the wounded demon, a grim look of resolve on his face.

At this point, there was no reason to argue. They had no other choice but to face the guardian of the island themselves. Sunny's bag of tricks was all empty anyway — in the end, their fates were still going to be decided by sharp blades.

Someone was going to get killed, and someone was going to be the killer.

"How are we going to deal with his armor?"

Nephis weighed the sword in her hand and glanced down.

"I will break through the armor. Can you create an opening?"

Sunny nodded, not wasting time on unnecessary questions. If Changing Star was certain of her ability to cut through the demon's carapace, he had no reason to doubt it.

Creating an opening… that was not going to be easy. Even though the monster had suffered terrible injuries, he was still a force to be reckoned with. His size alone was going to pose difficulties. They would have to bring the behemoth down to his knees before even thinking of carrying out any sort of an effective attack.

And he was not just going to stand still under their assault, either.

But what else was there to do?

While Nephis was tying the golden rope to the branch, Sunny walked over to Cassie and lightly squeezed her shoulder.

She tried to force a smile.

"I take it that the Carapace Demon is still alive?"

Despite the heavy, cold, dark feeling gripping his heart, Sunny tried to make his voice sound relaxed and carefree.

"Yeah, but just barely. Don't worry too much. This whole thing will be over in no time."

'One way or another,' he added inwardly.

Cassie's smile weakened. She was clearly not convinced by his clumsy attempt to reassure her.

Sunny hesitated.

"Hey. Have you ever eaten demon meat?"

The blind girl was clearly surprised by his question.

"What? No."

Sunny grinned.

"How about a demon steak? I'm an excellent cook, I'll have you know. Uh… I think. Neph had sort of monopolized the preparation of food, so I had no chance to put all the knowledge from the Wilderness Survival course to practice."

Teacher Julius had indeed spent a lot of time teaching him how to cook all kinds of seemingly inedible things, as well as meats of all sorts of Nightmare Creatures, in preparation for his journey into the Dream Realm. Here, hunger was as much of an enemy as the fiercest of monsters.

"As soon as we get our hands on some demon meat, I'll make you a steak. It'll be the most delicious demon steak you had ever eaten… I promise!"

Finally, a real smile appeared on Cassie's face. She gave him a courteous nod.

"Alright. That's a promise then."

Meanwhile, Nephis was done with the rope. She threw it down without hesitation and glanced at him.

"Are you ready?"

Sunny sighed and close his eyes for a second, feeling the strength of his body being enhanced by the shadow.

"Yes. Let's do this."

***

As soon as their feet touched the ground, Sunny felt a heavy gaze burning a hole in his chest. Glancing up, he saw the crippled Carapace Demon staring right at him, a dark glint shining in his one remaining eye.

The other one was gone, leaving only a bleeding black gap behind.

At this distance, the damage dealt to the demon's body seemed even more debilitating. Its carapace was fractured in several places and covered in cracks, each seeping with azure blood... sadly, none of the cracks were near the vital organs. His horns were shattered, as was one of his front legs — in addition to several rear ones that were either broken or torn off completely.

The stumps of his two severed arms were pressed tight against his torso to stem the heavy bleeding. The other two were hanging to the ground, almost brushing against the ashen sand.

The giant monster looked broken and tired. However, it was still terrifying, perhaps even more so than before. Because, despite the horrible wounds, his gaze was still firm and full of evil intelligence. It was still radiating madness and bloodlust.

Which was now concentrated on Sunny and Nephis — the architects of his sorry state.

The first beams of the rising sun shone on the spikes covering the demon's once lustrous carapace, painting them in shades of burning crimson.

Sunny summoned the Azure Blade and glanced at Nephis.

"Be careful. He's lightning fast."

He was the only one who had seen the terrible creature in action. As such, only he knew how dangerous the demon really was.

Nephis nodded, not taking her eyes off the enemy, and stepped forward.

The two of them walked toward the waiting Carapace Demon. Sunny was slightly ahead and aiming to circle the behemoth from the right — the side where the demon had both his last remaining scythe and eye.

Changing Star was a step or two behind him, aiming to circle the creature from the left — the side where his pincer arm was slowly rising into the air.

In this battle, Sunny's role was to take the brunt of the enemy's attacks, letting his partner deal the lethal blow when the time was right. Through the tacit understanding that they had developed through surviving dozens of life or death situations, the two of them were able to cooperate without speaking a single word, fighting almost as one.

This was their main advantage.

As they were closing in, Sunny felt a slight shift in the demon's posture. Instantly, he knew that hell was about to break loose.

He had warned Nephis about the speed of their enemy, but he also had to deal with it himself. Sunny knew that he was much slower than the giant creature, but he still had to find a way to dodge the massive, terrifying scythe.

That wasn't as bad as it seemed. Speed wasn't everything in a fight. Take, for example, Changing Star's training fight against the proud scion of the Han Li clan. Caster possessed an Aspect Ability that made him ten times faster than the silver-haired girl — at least. However, in the end, he only won by a hair's breadth. Nephis had almost smashed his face with an unexpected elbow strike.

She had been able to catch Caster unaware not because of her fast reaction — with that big of a difference between their speeds, no amount of reaction could have helped her. Instead, she was able to predict and manipulate the opponent's attacks, starting the strike even before Caster himself knew that he was going to end up in the path of her elbow.

She was in control of the battlefield.

And now, they had to repeat that feat against the ancient demon of the Forgotten Shore. Luckily, his speed advantage was not nearly as insane as Caster's.

Almost simultaneously, Sunny and Nephis lunged forward, attacking the behemoth from different sides. He also moved, ready to tear them apart. Both his pincer and his scythe rose into the air.

Sunny was running as fast as he could, the Azure Blade outstretched behind him. A fire of cold resolve was burning in his heart.

He was ready to live or die by his blade.

However, in the next moment, his leg seemed to slip in the sand, and as his eyes opened wide, Sunny stumbled.

Not wasting the opportunity, the Carapace Demon attacked. The terrifying scythe tore through the air, aiming to cut the helpless human in half…

But it hit only sand.

Sunny, who had feigned his loss of balance to bait the demon's strike, easily avoided the deadly blade by jumping to the side at the last second.

He wasn't quite at the level where he could predict every move of the enemy. Instead, manipulating the enemy into performing a predictable attack was easier.

After all, deceit and manipulation were his forte.

Temporarily safe from the threat of the scythe, Sunny dashed toward the demon's legs.

At the same time, Nephis had managed to avoid the massive pincer and was closing in on them, too. They reached their goals almost simultaneously, one from the right, the other from the left.

Sunny slashed with the Azure Blade, feeling it hit the polished armor and bounce back without leaving even a slight scratch on it. Dull pain radiated through his hands.

On the other side of the behemoth's massive body, Nephis achieved more success. She had attacked the already injured front leg of the monster, cutting deep into his flesh through the wide crack in the metal plate. Severely damaged, the leg wasn't able to support the weight of the giant creature anymore. It buckled, sending the demon reeling.

At this point, a scavenger or a centurion would have lost their balance and fallen to the ground. However, the Carapace Demon was too smart and experienced. He compensated for the loss of another leg by shifting his body weight to the opposite side and thrusting his scythe into the ground to remain stable.

'Damn it!'

Sunny had really hoped that the bastard would fall down.

Because then he wouldn't have had to do what he was about to do next.

But now there was no other choice.

Cursing inwardly, Sunny briefly looked up at the massive body of the giant demon. Heavens only knew how much that thing weighed.

Then, he held his breath and ducked right beneath the Carapace Demon's steel abdomen.

Chapter-71: One Small Mistake

With the Carapace Demon using his deadly scythe to support the weight of his body, Sunny was temporarily safe from its sharp blade. Of course, the monster had other means of attack. Each one of his towering legs was like a siege ram, dangerous and capable of devastating destruction.

But at the moment, his position was too precarious to lash out with them. Sunny had at least a second to do whatever he wished to, with no risk involved.

The only thing he had to avoid was going directly under the behemoth, thus putting himself in danger of being crushed to death by the demon's giant body.

Coincidentally, that was exactly what he had to do.

'Crap, crap, crap!'

Glancing up at the massive armored creature, Sunny cursed and dashed forward. A moment later, he dove underneath the Carapace Demon, feeling the thick shadows swallow him whole.

Instantly, Sunny was covered in cold sweat. There was nothing but polished metal and murderous intent above him now. All the monster had to do to turn the tiny human into a puddle of blood was to rest his body on the sand.

Under the crushing weight, Sunny's organs would burst and his bones would turn to dust. There wouldn't be anything solid left of him at all, only a thin layer of bloody goo smeared across the ground.

Not the best situation to find yourself in.

With his nerves on the verge of melting, Sunny brandished his sword and rushed forward. His eyes were glued to the joints of Carapace Demon's legs. He was utterly focused, looking for the slightest movement. Waiting for it.

With no room for error, Sunny pushed every unnecessary thought and emotion into the farthest corner of his mind, not allowing dread, doubt and his tendency to overthink things to slow him down even by a fraction of a second.

Time moved excruciatingly slowly. It felt as though hours had passed, but in reality, it was only a couple of moments. Sunny was only at the second pair of the giant monster's legs.

It was then that he finally noticed the almost imperceptible change in the demon's posture. The tension in his joint changed slightly, indicating that the behemoth was about to move.

This was the sign that Sunny was both hoping for and terrified of. Now, his survival was wholly dependent on whether or not he was fast enough.

As soon as his eyes had registered the change in the creature's posture, Sunny pivoted on one leg and dashed to the side, trying to get away from underneath the armored giant. A small cloud of sand was sent flying by his sudden turn.

But the demon was incredibly fast. He threw his body down, determined to squash the odious invader like a bug. With inertia and the limits of his human body slowing Sunny down, he felt the metal surface of the carapace begin to fall down on his head long before reaching the safe zone.

Death was approaching with abhorrent speed.

One step, two… was he going to make it in time?!

The Carapace Demon fell to the ground with a thunderous crash, sending large clouds of sand into the air. The impact was so strong that the whole island trembled.

The furious mass of falling metal and spikes missed Sunny by just a few centimeters. He flew from underneath the demon's body at the last possible moment by performing a desperate dive.

Crashing into the sand, Sunny rolled away and jumped back to his feet, slightly disoriented by the shockwave of the giant's fall.

'Huh… I actually managed to survive.'

Sometimes, life was full of surprises.

But, all jokes aside, he was not really astonished. His actions, while potentially fatal, had been deliberate and calculated. He was not in the habit of putting his life at risk without being sure that there would be at least a moderate chance of making it out alive.

His actions were also always purposeful and pursued a specific goal.

In this case, it was to bring the Carapace Demon down.

Only by forcing the giant creature down to the ground, in reach of their blades, could they hope to kill it.

In that sense, this dangerous gamble ended in resounding success. The bastard was now lying on his abdomen, his carapace and humanoid torso, where all the vital organs were situated, well in the Changing Star's attack range.

Now Sunny just had to create an opening for her to deal the fatal blow… although he still had no idea about how she was planning to bypass the impenetrable barrier of the demon's armor.

However, creating that opening was not going to be a trivial task. Despite the fact that the monster's mobility was now severely reduced, the distance between him and the two Sleepers was also much smaller. Which made dodging his attacks that much harder.

Sunny was about to experience that hardship for himself.

He was barely back on his feet when the terrifying scythe flashed through the air, threatening to slice his body in half. Sunny had no idea how Nephis was doing on the other side of the creature's enormous body against the pincer, but dealing with the scythe was almost beyond his abilities.

The burning eye of the demon that followed his every move was not helping the situation at all.

With very little time to react, Sunny did the only thing he could think of — he jumped as high as he could and pulled his legs up to his chest, performing a very awkward forward somersault.

Because of the number of shadow fragments he had consumed and the physical enhancement brought by the shadow, the height of his jump was nothing short of impressive, by human standards. The scythe's blade whistled beneath Sunny, so close that he could feel the wind brushing against his face.

Landing on the ground, he dashed forward. Sunny knew that the scythe would come back, but he had a second or two to change his position, getting in front of the behemoth.

He had to make the giant creature forget about Nephis completely and concentrate fully on dealing with him, and him alone. To do that, he had to get in range of both the scythe and the pincer.

What a lovely task!

Feeling that his time was running out, Sunny spun around and raised the Azure Blade.

Just as he thought, the Carapace Demon was already bringing the scythe down at him again, this time in a ruthless horizontal thrust. The sharp tip of the scythe was flying through the air, aimed at his chest.

However, he had slightly underestimated the demon's reaction time. As the result, there was already no time to dodge.

One small mistake was the difference between life and death on the Forgotten Shore.

The scene of their first fight against a carapace centurion flashed in Sunny's mind. The situation was eerily similar to this one, with the inescapable doom approaching him at the speed of lightning, too swift and close to be avoided.

Brought by the blade of a carapace creatures's scythe.

But Sunny wasn't the same as he was before. Since that fateful battle, he had spent every day training, gaining experience and gathering power. He had fought his way through this hell, paying a price of blood for every step.

He wasn't that easy to kill anymore.

Instead of soft flesh, the scythe was met by the hard steel of the Azure Blade. Not only did Sunny block the blow, he even managed to angle the sword in a way that would deflect most of the impact instead of absorbing the full force of it.

One of his hands was placed on the hilt, the other gripped the tip of the blade with enough strength to prevent the edge from cutting his fingers off.

The residual force was still enough to send him flying back… but it was not enough to break the bones in his hands. Not with the shadow enhancing the resilience of his body.

...The Azure Blade, however, was not as lucky.

With a sorrowful ring, the blade shattered, breaking off near the crossguard. Beautiful shards of blue steel fell to the ground.

Sunny gritted his teeth, knowing what would happen next.

The Spell spoke, announcing the destruction of his trusty sword.

[Your Memory has been…]

He didn't get to hear the rest of the sentence, because, in the next moment, his body collided with the ground. Sunny bounced a couple of times, feeling flashes of pain radiating through his bones, rolled, and finally came to a stop.

He was comparatively fine.

Standing up, Sunny stumbled and barely managed to remain on his feet. He glanced around and noticed that the trunk of the great tree was not that far away.

Two dozen meters away, the Carapace Demon was slowly turning his head, planning to concentrate his murderous rage on Nephis. This was the exact opposite of what Sunny had to achieve.

He had to attract the monster's attention somehow.

But what could he do?

As the remains of the Azure Blade began to shine with soft light in his hand, ready to disintegrate into a rain of sparks, Sunny raised his hand and threw the broken sword with as much force as he could gather.

However, he didn't throw it at the demon.

Instead, he threw it at the miraculous tree, as though trying to harm it.

Not far away, the demon suddenly froze, even if only for a second. His scarlet eye followed the shining Memory as it flew through the air, approaching the trunk of the great tree.

Then the broken sword fell apart, turning into a shower of white sparks, which then disappeared without a trace. None of them even touched the obsidian bark.

However, the Azure Blade had already fulfilled its purpose.

It distracted the giant for a few precious moments.

For Changing Star, that was more than enough.

Chapter-72: Demon Slayers

As soon as the Carapace Demon froze, distracted by the feigned threat to the great tree, Nephis lunged forward. There was no hesitation, no doubt, not even the slightest pause between the moment her enemy had lowered his defenses and her reckless attack.

Just like Sunny had been utterly focused on observing the monster's movements before, she had been watching and waiting for this exact moment since the beginning of the battle. Changing Star knew that, when the opportunity presents itself, it will only last for a second.

Even that single second almost cost Sunny his life. Nephis wasn't going to waste it.

Her graceful figure flew through the air like an arrow released from a powerful bow, almost leaving afterimages behind. The silver blade of her longsword glimmered, reflecting the light of dawn. The black and white armor seemed to turn into a blur.

She was going all in, rushing at the enemy without leaving herself even the slightest chance to retreat.

'Wh…'

Things were happening too fast for Sunny to form a coherent thought. He could only watch, time slowing down to a crawl, a storm of emotions raging in his mind.

The demon reacted almost immediately, recognizing the threat. But "almost" didn't count on a battlefield. A moment of distraction was all it took to lose everything. That one mistake, no matter how small, had been enough to seal his fate.

…If Nephis was really capable of breaking through the creature's indestructible carapace, that is. Otherwise, it was all for nothing, and they would be the ones dying, instead.

The fearsome giant moved his scythe, trying to slice her apart. The pincer flashed from the other side, threatening to crush her body into pulp. But he was a fraction of a second too late.

Changing Star was just a tiny bit faster.

As she ran, something changed about the cadence of her steps. Sunny couldn't see her face behind the visor of her helmet, but if he could, he would see a grimace of agony contorting Neph's pale face.

In the next moment, a soft white radiance ignited beneath the skin of her hands. However, this time, it didn't stay there. Instead, the white flame flowed outward, into the hilt of the silver sword, and then into its blade.

The sword suddenly turned into a sharp radiant edge, burning with incandescent white light. It shined so brightly that Sunny felt the desire to close his eyes.

However, the radiance wasn't soft and warm anymore. Instead, it seemed to be capable of reducing anything it touched to ash and sharp enough to cut the fabric of the world itself.

Perhaps, it was even sharp enough to cut the strings of fate.

Sunny remembered how Nephis had described her Aspect Ability… "it can be used for healing". Back then, he had suspected that this phrase of hers implied that there was more to it. He even marveled at how precious and rare such an Ability would be.

It seemed as though he was right. Changing Star's miraculous flame was capable of both healing and destroying. It possessed an enhancing effect similar to his own Shadow Control, at least when applied to weapons. Who knew what else it could do?

An incredible Ability indeed.

Looking back, he understood that Nephis had not tortured herself in vain. All the times she pretended to meditate while enduring the excruciating agony of her Flaw in secret were meant to make this moment possible. To give her enough fortitude to use this Ability in battle without passing out from the pain.

She succeeded. The question was… would that be enough?

Was her sword strong enough to break the mighty carapace of the Awakened demon? After all, no matter how incredible the Ability, it was still powered by a weak Dormant soul core of a lowly Sleeper.

…They were about to find out.

A few steps away from the Carapace Demon's towering torso, Nephis bent her legs and jumped, soaring high into the air. Her sword flashed forward in a vicious thrust, so fast that, for a moment, it looked like a beam of pure white sunlight.

Then, it collided with the strange alloy of the giant's lustrous armor… right at the spot where his heart was supposed to be.

'Of course!'

Back when they were hiding in the dead leviathan's empty spine, Cassie had told them about her vision. In that vision, she saw the Carapace Demon being attacked by a terrible creature of the deep dark sea. In the aftermath of the battle, the demon was severely wounded and on the verge of dying.

The most horrible wound was on his chest, where the armor was torn apart and shattered, revealing the monster's beating heart. With time, all his injuries had healed.

Except for this one.

While the carapace of the demon seemed to have recovered, in truth, it was never fully restored. In this one spot, the armor was secretly weakened. And it was exactly to that spot that Nephis had delivered her blow.

It didn't matter whether her radiant sword was really capable of breaking through the impregnable armor of the Awakened creature, because she attacked the only weak spot on his body, the place where his armor had already been broken.

…With a flash of white light, the incandescent sword pierced through the metal of the demon's carapace and plunged into his body, unleashing a fury of fire inside the adamantine shell.

It seemed as though the giant was suddenly illuminated from within, with beams of light shining through the cracks in his armor. For a moment, the surreal sight was burned into Sunny's mind.

Then, Changing Star's sword had reached the Carapace Demon's heart and sliced it apart, incinerating everything around it and making the azure blood of the fearsome creature boil and evaporate.

Sunny's legs buckled, and he gracelessly fell on his ass.

'Wh—wha… We did it?'

The demon staggered. His arms slowly rose, as though trying to pull Nephis into a final embrace. But then, as his body twitched, they fell to the ground.

Neph landed in the sand and jumped back, ready to defend herself.

But there was no need.

The proud guardian of the Ashen Barrow was dying. The scarlet light in his one remaining eye was dimming, any semblance of intelligence quickly disappearing from his gaze.

The demon heavily slumped, all remnants of strength abandoning his mighty body. Turning his head with incredible effort, he cast one last look on the great tree. Then, his gaze stopped on Sunny.

There was no fury or madness in that gaze anymore. Only some strange, calm, inexplicable emotion. It almost felt like… relief.

Before Sunny could discern the meaning of that emotion, the last glimmer of light was gone from the eye of the Carapace Demon. His head rolled back and fell.

They won.

In front of the giant body, Nephis had dismissed her helmet. Behind it, her face was pale and tired, her hair sticking to it in a sweaty mess. The afterglow of the white radiance was already extinguished, leaving her eyes grey once again.

Changing Star kneeled, then lay down on her back, too exhausted to move.

The whole fight lasted less than a minute, but it took everything out of both of them.

Sunny followed Neph's example and lay on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

They actually won. He couldn't quite believe it.

'I want to sleep for a week.'

Remembering that Cassie was still waiting in the branches of the great tree, not knowing who lived and who died, Sunny sighed. A few moments later, he deeply inhaled.

Then, straining his vocal cords, he screamed at the top of his lungs.

In the silence of the morning, in the center of the tall hill covered with ashen sand, under the branches of a beautiful, giant tree, a strange shout could be heard:

"One demon steak, coming right up!"

Chapter-73: The Circle of Death

A few minutes later, Sunny heard a noise coming from somewhere above. Looking in that direction, he noticed that Cassie was standing at the edge of the wide branch, gripping the golden rope in her hands.

Before he could react, the blind girl was already climbing down. She was very cautious, but also quite nimble for someone without sight.

He blinked.

'Is she crazy? That's dangerous!'

But he was worried for nothing. Cassie quickly reached the ground and let go of the rope, safe and sound. She then summoned her staff and took a hesitant step, trying to remember where his shout had come from.

Sunny made his presence known and guided her by saying:

"I'm here!"

The blind girl turned her head in his direction and walked forward, carefully feeling the ground in front of her with the staff. Because of how uneven the surface of the island had become, it took her longer than usual to reach him.

Just as she was about to walk past, Sunny spoke again:

"Hey, Cas."

Cassie stopped and lowered her head with a surprised expression. Then, she asked:

"Why are you lying on the ground?"

He smiled weakly.

"Ah, it's very comfortable."

Suddenly, the blind girl frowned and asked in a worried tone:

"Are you hurt?"

Sunny shook his head with a sigh. His sense of humor was not always appreciated. In fact, it had often landed him in hot water in the past.

"Just bruised all over. Nothing serious. I'm just really tired… that one was really intense."

Since Cassie was still frowning, he thought for a moment and added:

"Neph is also fine. She's resting a bit further away."

Finally, the delicate girl relaxed. Her face cleared, and she offered him a hesitant smile.

"You really killed that demon?"

Sunny cast a gaze at the giant corpse and closed his eyes.

"Yeah. He's very dead."

Both of them were silent for some time. Sunny was on the verge of falling asleep when Cassie carefully asked:

"So… you're just going to continue lying here?"

He opened his eyes and blinked, trying to remember what was going on.

'Oh, right. It's morning. There are things we have to do…'

The last day was excruciatingly long and exhausting. They had to make preparations to execute the plan, race to the top of the hill, climb the great tree, hide themselves in its branches, risk their lives to set the demon on fire, not to mention the… all the stuff that happened after. All culminating in the short but terrifying battle against the creature itself.

And yet, it was not time to rest yet. They had to take basic precautions, at least.

Straining his exhausted body, Sunny stood up and offered Cassie his shoulder. After she placed her hand on it, he walked over to the Carapace Demon's corpse, stopping at the spot where Nephis was sprawled in the sand.

She greeted them with a tired glance.

"Good morning."

Out of habit, Changing Star tried to force a polite smile. However, today it did not look very convincing.

'Huh, I give it 3.6 out of ten. Not great, not terrible.'

Soon, the three of them were sitting in a circle, passing around the glass bottle full of cold, refreshing water. Sunny was in the middle of describing their fight with the Carapace Demon:

"... so he got distracted for a few moments. That's when Neph attacked. She used her Aspect Ability to ignite her sword and struck at the weakened patch of armor on the demon's chest, the one you told us about. It really was not as strong as the rest of his carapace, so the sword went through and pierced the bastard's heart."

Sunny noted that Cassie did not seem surprised at the mention of Changing Star's new trick. Either she knew all along because Nephis had told her, or she saw something in one of her visions. Regardless, he decided not to press the topic.

"The demon was already severely wounded from his fight with the… the thing from the sea, so it was enough to finish him off. A few seconds later, he was dead."

Cassie shook her head in astonishment.

"That is… incredible. Two Sleepers killing an awakened demon! I thought that stuff like that only happens in webtoons."

Nephis corrected her:

"Three Sleepers. Without your vision and advice, we wouldn't have been able to do anything."

The blind girl lowered her face, a little embarrassed.

"Still. Two or three, it doesn't really change a lot, does it?"

Sunny looked from one girl to another, then finally turned to Cassie.

"You're right, it's not something one would expect to happen. But, anyway… I promised to cook demon meat for you after this is over, didn't I? Are you ready to witness my

incredible culinary talent?"

He smiled, already tasting the juicy, tender meat in his mouth. However, Cassie suddenly frowned, a hesitant expression appearing on her face.

"I… I don't know about that."

He raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why?"

She lingered before answering.

"Well, it just seems weird to eat the meat of an intelligent creature. Even if it was evil. I didn't think about it before, but now… uh. It just doesn't seem right, I guess."

Sunny blinked. Actually, he did not think about it either. In retrospect, the idea of making steaks out of a creature whose intelligence was comparable to theirs did seem a little wrong. Even if that creature was a bloodthirsty demon who would have swallowed them whole without a second thought.

It was just how things worked in the Dream Realm. Monsters devoured humans, and humans devoured monsters. It was the circle of life... death? The circle of death.

But the Carapace Demon was not only smart. He had his own thoughts and personality. Even though Nightmare Creatures were universally insane and obsessed with murder and destruction, just like he was, there were also other qualities to the ironclad giant.

He was proud and fearless, even valiant. When fighting against the terrifying monsters of the dark sea, he did not hesitate to stand his ground, refusing to surrender. Cooking the meat of someone like that could indeed be considered… strange.

'How come Teacher Julius did not educate me on the ethics of eating your enemies? What an oversight!'

Misunderstanding Sunny's silence, Cassie blushed and said:

"Sorry. I know it seems ridiculous, but that's just how I feel. You and Neph don't have to do the same."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, you might be right. I understand… sort of. It's just that we didn't bring any supplies with us, so we won't be able to eat anything unless we go hunting."

The blind girl sighed. Then, her face brightened and she said:

"What about the great tree's fruits? I bet they're delicious!"

Sunny looked at her in amazement.

"Are you serious?"

Cassie was visibly confused by his question.

"Uh… yes? Why?"

He blinked a couple of times before answering.

"That tree is magnificent and pretty, but it's also very strange and suspicious. Why is it able to grow here when nothing else can? I'm pretty sure that it's the reason why all the coral around the Ashen Barrow is dead. Have you seen anything else capable of damaging the labyrinth itself?"

Sunny looked at Cassie, then at Nephis, trying to show how serious he was about this.

"In any case, it's too creepy. I don't think that we should eat these fruits. Who knows what they'll do to us?"

The blind girl smiled.

"You're being a little paranoid, don't you think? A tree is a tree. Actually, I think it's a wonderful example of how life can prevail against all odds, even in this terrible place. I'm willing to bet that its fruits are perfectly fine."

He stared at her, not knowing what to say. How could Cassie be so dismissive of his completely valid concern? That wasn't like her at all. Unpleasantly surprised, Sunny turned to Neph, hoping that she would support him.

Changing Star thought things through before speaking. Then, she said in a measured voice:

"Sunny is right. There are too many strange things about that tree. Eating its fruits would be too risky."

'Finally, a voice of reason!'

He exhaled, relieved.

However, his heart was still inexplicably gripped with worry.

As Cassie sighed with disappointment, Changing Star turned to him and asked:

"The Echo was destroyed?"

Sunny's face darkened. He was still pained by the loss of his loyal scavenger.

"Yeah. The demon acted faster than I had expected. He killed it before I could do anything."

Nephis frowned.

"Too bad. Our speed will be severely reduced."

'Have you no heart, woman?! At least pretend to be sad! My poor Echo is gone!'

His shadow shook its head, amazed at the childishness of its master. Sunny was also surprised by his reaction, considering that his own first thought after the Echo had died was about how much money he wouldn't be able to make by selling it.

"Yeah. It's a… uh… pity."

Changing Star gave him a nod and then asked:

"You also lost your sword?"

Sunny sighed and gritted his teeth.

"Yes. It shattered when I blocked the demon's scythe."

Which hurt even more than the death of his scavenger. Azure Blade was his first sword. He fought and trained with it for a long time. It was already like a part of him.

And now it was gone.

Nephis raised a hand.

"Well, you're in luck. I received a Memory after killing the Carapace Demon. It's a weapon…"

Chapter-74: Midnight Shard

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

Instantly, he forgot all about the Azure Blade. Yes, that sword held a certain sentimental value… but who the hell cares about sentimentality?! It came from a carapace scavenger, which wasn't bad at all for his current rank. Few Sleepers got to wield Awakened weapons.

But this new Memory came from an actual awakened demon! A demon!

That made it an Awakened Memory of the third tier, two whole tiers above the Azure Blade. There were seven tiers in total, corresponding to the seven classes of Nightmare Creatures, from beasts to titans. Strictly speaking, a higher tier did not always mean that a Memory will be more powerful, but generally, the more advanced a creature was, the more unique and formidable Memories it left behind.

That's why the Puppeteer's Shroud, which came from an awakened tyrant and was thus considered to be a Tier Five Awakened armor, was so precious.

'Please, be awesome!'

Sunny tried very hard to not let his excitement show on his face. Pretending to be nonchalant, he kept his voice even and said:

"Really? That's good."

Nephis took his hand, ruining all Sunny's attempts to appear calm, and closed her eyes. Hiding the startled expression on his face, Sunny felt a spark of energy travel from her body to his. It was just like that time he transferred the Starlight Legion Armor to her, only in reverse.

[You have received a Memory: Midnight Shard.]

'Huh. Cool name.'

He summoned the runes and impatiently searched for the description of his new weapon.

Memory: [Midnight Shard].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Forged from the shard of a fallen star, this stalwart blade is firm and unyielding. It favors those who are willing to fight to the last drop of blood and knows no surrender.]

'Interesting.'

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard. Immediately, an elegant sword appeared in his hand.

The sword looked a bit like the Azure Blade, but only in the sense that it was single-edged and had a long hilt suitable for two hands. However, this was where the similarities ended. For starters, its blade was much longer, somewhere between seventy and eighty centimeters, and slightly curved. It was forged out of the same bright, lustrous metal as the Carapace Demon's armor.

It was incredibly sharp.

The hilt was made out of polished black wood, quite similar in appearance to the onyx branches of the great tree. The crossguard was round in shape and more pronounced than that of the Azure Blade, offering better support and protection to the wielder's hand.

The sword had no decorations, no ornaments, no embellishments. It was simple and austere, like a true weapon designed for battle and battle alone. It seemed to radiate a cold, fearsome aura.

As soon as his hand touched the Midnight Shard, Sunny felt that this sword possessed an unbreakable will. Its blade was strong enough to withstand devastating blows without suffering any damage. With this sword in his hand, nothing would be able to leave Sunny unarmed again.

More than that, there was a strange new sensation somewhere deep in his heart. When Sunny held the Midnight Shard, he could feel a subtle presence, as though there was a

deep well of power hiding inside of him, just beyond reach. He couldn't quite understand how to access that power yet, but it was certainly real.

'I guess I'll have to win its "favor" first. But how do I do it? Hmm. I'll have to experiment later.'

Admiring his new weapon, Sunny looked at Nephis and said:

"Even I know what type of sword this is. It's a… a katana, right?"

She studied the Midnight Shard and then answered:

"Technically, it's a tachi. It's longer than a traditional katana and has a slightly different blade shape. But they're quite similar."

A tachi… well, it sounded nice anyway. And most of the principles he had learned with the Azure Blade could be applied to a sword of this type as well, since they shared the same foundation.

The new acquisition wasn't quite enough to make Sunny forget about the loss of the Echo, but his mood did improve significantly. He liked the Midnight Shard... a lot. There was beauty in its simple, resolute design.

It was understated and deadly. Kind of like Sunny himself.

It was a significant upgrade.

Suddenly, a dark thought appeared in Sunny's mind. Glancing at Nephis, he cleared his throat and said after a bit of hesitation:

"Uh… it's a very nice weapon. Tier three, no less. Are you sure that you don't want to keep it for yourself?"

Changing Star was the one to deal the final blow to the Carapace Demon, after all. By right, the Memory belonged to her. But Sunny really, really hoped that she would refuse.

Nephis shook her head.

"I already have a sword. It suits me."

Inwardly, Sunny sighed with relief.

'Good,' he thought. 'Makes you wonder, though — if she's unwilling to exchange her longsword for a tier-three weapon… then what is the tier of that silver sword of hers?'

He didn't buy the idea that it simply suited Changing Star better even for a second. She had told him herself that the principle of using these types of swords was basically the same. Upgrading to the Midnight Shard and giving the old weapon to Sunny would not have caused her any problem. The only reason she would refuse it was that it would have been a downgrade, instead.

Once again, he became curious about the exact circumstances of how Neph had gotten her True Name. To receive his own, Sunny had to kill an awakened tyrant. Could it be possible that she had done the same? Or even… something more incredible?

But he was too tired to try and fish for information.

They all were.

Afraid that the strange winged creature they had seen devouring a dead centurion would appear again, this time to claim the remains of the Carapace Demon, the three Sleepers relocated to a far side of the island and hid behind the trunk of the great tree.

Only when they were sure that nothing would be able to notice them from above did they finally allow the exhaustion to prevail and went to sleep. Sunny fell into dreamless darkness almost instantly, happy to finally be able to rest.

However, this time something strange happened.

He actually saw a dream.

'Strange,' Sunny thought. 'This isn't supposed to happen in the Dream Realm… right?'

Then, there was no more time to think…

Chapter-75: Broken Dreams

Sunny woke up from the insistent sense of alarm coming from his shadow. Groggy and disoriented, he opened his eyes and sat up.

'Wh—what's wrong?'

He looked down at the shadow and saw it repeatedly pointing up with a tense expression on its… well, it didn't have a face. He could just tell that it was nervous.

'Trouble?'

Sunny looked up and saw nothing but the scarlet leaves of the great tree. The sky was hidden, but he could easily tell that the sun was still up. It seemed that he was asleep for just a few hours.

There was no threat anywhere in sight. He frowned.

'What got you so spooked?'

The shadow just pointed up again, seemingly irritated by his stupidity. Sunny blinked a couple of times and addressed it again:

'High in the tree? Higher? In the sky?'

Finally satisfied, the shadow crossed its arms.

'Something dangerous is above the island… that creepy raven thing again?'

He had to check… but why did he feel as though he was forgetting something?

Sunny scowled, trying to understand where this feeling of missing something important had come from. What was there to miss? He was asleep, then woke up and conversed with the shadow.

Asleep…

Suddenly, he remembered bits and pieces of a strange dream. At least it seemed like a dream… was it? People weren't supposed to dream in the Dream Realm. It was just how things worked… from what he knew, only Cassie seemed to be an exception from this rule.

He didn't remember much about this supposed dream of his, with even the remaining fragments already fading from his memory. There was a… a woman grabbing him by the shoulders, an expression of horror and panic on her face. She was saying something, but he couldn't hear what.

No, not a woman. It was… Cassie? Yes, it was her. And the thing she was saying…

Sunny strained his memory, trying to catch the pieces of the dream before they completely disappeared.

'Yeah, I think she was saying… uh…'

Suddenly, he could clearly hear Cassie's frightened, tense voice as she was hurriedly telling him to remember something, repeating the same sentence over and over again in a begging tone:

"...you have to remember, Sunny! Five! It's five! Remember! You have to remember! It's five!"

'What a strange dream.'

Sunny cast a glance at Cassie, who was sleeping peacefully near Neph, and shook his head in bewilderment. He wasn't sure if this memory of his was really a dream or some strange scene he had imagined right before falling asleep. With how the Dream Realm worked, he was leaning toward the latter possibility.

'Still. I better tell the girls when…'

He was distracted from this thought by the shadow, which waved its hands impatiently.

'Oh, right. There's a threat in the sky…'

Instantly, Sunny had forgotten all about his intention to share the contents of this strange memory of his with Nephis and Cassie. In fact, he had forgotten that it was strange and possibly important altogether.

This lapse in his judgment was sudden and unnatural, but since Sunny couldn't remember things that he had forgotten, he didn't notice anything amiss and went about his business as if nothing had happened.

…If he did, he could have realized that this might not have been the first time he had forgotten something important since they arrived at the Ashen Barrow.

Standing up, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced darkly at the blood-red leaves of the great tree. Feeling the coolness of the black polished hilt in his hand, he felt a little calmer.

Woken up by his quiet movements, Nephis opened her eyes and looked at him, her body tensing up. There was a silent question in her eyes.

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't know yet. Stay with Cassie while I check things out."

Leaving the girls behind, Sunny walked forward. He was planning to reach the edge of the island, where the branches of the colossal tree were not as thick and the sky could be seen through the openings in its crown.

Technically, he could have sent his shadow to do this instead of going himself. But in situations like this, where the danger was unknown, Sunny usually preferred to keep the shadow close by in case he needed to use it.

Reaching the eastern slope of the Ashen Barrow, he carefully looked up, still hidden in the shadow of the great tree.

Up above in the vast grey sky, a small black dot was circling around the island.

Sunny's chest became heavy with wariness. Back when the terrible winged beast had first appeared, it looked exactly like this from the distance.

Leaving the shadow behind to keep watch on the black dot, he returned and briefly told Nephis and Cassie about his discovery.

"Right now, it's just flying above the island. I don't know if it's the same creature or not, and when it is going to land."

Changing Star frowned.

"Last time, it wasn't very interested in searching for live prey. Perhaps it's mostly a carrion eater, and thus is only interested in the Carapace Demon's carcass."

Cassie offered her own opinion:

"Maybe we're too weak and little to satiate it? After all, it never came for the corpses of the scavengers we had slain. As if eating mere beasts is beneath it."

Sunny shook his head.

"Back then, it did come for the carapace centurion's meat. But it took a few scavengers with it as well before leaving. So it'll be too optimistic to think that this abomination will not try to devour us too if given a chance."

Nephis thought for a while, then gave him a nod.

"You're right. The best course of action would be to stay away from the Carapace Demon for now and hide when it decides to land."

Then, looking up, she added:

"But first, we must observe it to make sure that it's the same creature and confirm its intentions."

Not having an argument against this logic, Sunny led the girls to the spot where he had left his shadow. There, they sat on the ground and watched the black dot as it circled around the Ashen Barrow.

Observing the flying creature left them disturbed and unsure of what to do.

The black dot drew closer a few times, allowing them to discern that it was indeed the same terrible monstrosity that they had encountered a few weeks before, or at least a creature of the same type. However, it never got too close to the crown of the great tree, as though hesitating to land in its shadow.

What's worse, as hours passed by, it was joined by two other abominations of the same breed, each as horrifying and repulsive as the first one was. Now, three black dots were circling in the skies above their heads, filling Sunny's heart with dread.

One of those creatures, with its corpselike white body and raven-black feathers, with an unnatural mess of powerful limbs protruding from its wide chest, each ending with a set of terrifying talons, was enough to wipe out their entire group.

The memory of how easily the creature had broken through the adamantine shell of the carapace centurion with its massive beak was still fresh in his mind. He suspected that these abominations were at least as powerful as the Carapace Demon was, or perhaps even more so.

And now there were three of them.

'We'd better hide well.' he thought, cold sweat running down his back.

However, the flying monsters seemed to be reluctant to approach the Ashen Barrow for some reason. They just circled around it, sometimes hesitantly approaching, but then gaining height again. Their behavior was strange and disturbing.

After some time, Cassie quietly said:

"Maybe they're not hungry?"

Sunny blinked, trying to imagine a world where a Nightmare Creature might not be hungry. Was it even possible?

He, on the other hand…

"I don't know about these albino chickens, but I'm hungry as hell."

This was true. The three of them had not eaten anything since yesterday. Sunny was afraid that if the abominations did decide to land on the island, the loud growls of his stomach would give away his position.

Nephis glanced and him and asked:

"Want to eat some grilled chicken?"

Sunny opened his eyes wide and hissed:

"Don't even think about it!"

She stared at him, then turned away with a smile.

'That was… a joke? She knows how to joke?'

Well… at least someone's sense of humor was worse than his.

…In the end, their worst fears did not come true. After the sun began to roll toward the horizon, the three flying abominations finally made a decision and left the skies above the Ashen Barrow, flying west in a loose wedge formation. They never descended low enough to notice the three Sleepers, let alone landing on the surface of the large island.

Sunny was left drenched in sweat and tired from anticipating a disaster, almost disappointed at the fact that all this worrying had turned out to be for nothing. Looking at Cassie, who couldn't see that the danger had passed, he said:

"They're gone."

The blind girl exhaled with relief and relaxed, the frown disappearing from her face.

"Thank Heavens. Sitting here and waiting was five times worse than hiding from one of them at those cliffs."

For some reason, Sunny flinched a little.

"What… what did you say?"

"I said that waiting for them to land was very tiresome."

He blinked, not understanding why he had reacted so strangely to this innocuous sentence. Did he see a dream having to do with Cassie and number five? Right, he did. Not that it was anything to think twice about.

"Oh, yeah. You're right."

Then he turned to Nephis and asked:

"What do you want to do now?"

Changing Star looked west, where the black dots had disappeared from sight, and said after a short pause:

"Let's check the western edge of the island and decide on the next high point to reach."

Sunny shrugged, not having any objections.

Cassie smiled:

"Good idea! Who knows, maybe we'll finally see the walls of the castle!"

***

Soon, they had crossed the island and approached its western slope. Here, the ground was raised just before plunging down, forming a natural rampart that hid the landscape from their eyes.

Nephis was the first to climb up and reach the top.

Sunny was just behind her when he felt that something was wrong. Changing Star's posture was somehow strange, stiff and rigid, as though she had suddenly turned to stone.

Stepping on the ashen surface of the natural rampart, he worriedly looked at Nephis and noticed a grim, resentful expression on her face. He had never seen her in such a state before.

Turning his head, Sunny looked west and then narrowed his eyes. His face instantly darkened.

Feeling the desire to curse, Sunny gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Inside his head, only one word was repeating over and over again.

'Damn! Damn! Damn!'

Chapter-76: The Abyss

Beyond the western edge of the Ashen Barrow, the landscape of the Forgotten Shore was not at all like what Sunny had expected — and hoped — to see.

On this side of the island, the slope was much steeper. At the spot where it was supposed to end, the familiar sight of the flat wasteland was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the ground continued to slope downward at a less drastic, but still considerably sharp angle.

It continued far into the distance. In fact, the whole island appeared to be standing on the edge of a colossal depression in the earth, one that stretched as far as the eye could see. With its edges slightly curved, it resembled a giant crater left behind by an unimaginable impact.

From what Sunny was able to observe, the crater's diameter could only be calculated in hundreds of kilometers. The roots of the giant tree, which could be seen protruding from the soil far below, seemed like tiny blades of grass in comparison to the sheer size of the abyssal chasm's wall.

It was like the whole world was tilted on its side, making Sunny's head spin.

In short, there were no more high natural features to the west of them. The only way forward was to go down, with no hope of finding shelter from the crushing torrents of the dark sea.

Which meant that there was no way forward at all. Their journey to the west had come to an end.

And with it, all hope of finding a gateway to the real world was lost.

Sunny stared at the desolate landscape, feeling rage and disbelief clawing at his heart. He just couldn't believe that all their struggles were for nothing. But the proof was right in front of him, real and undeniable.

'Damn it! Damn it all!'

He tried to think of some cunning way to solve the situation, but there was nothing his imagination could come up with. The dark sea with all its horrors drowned the world every night, and the only way to escape it was to climb high enough before the sunset. With no heights anywhere in sight, what could he do?

Sunny glanced at Nephis, who seemed to be even more crestfallen than him. Her face had turned into an icy mask, a dark look full of bitterness and resentment in her eyes. He opened his mouth, trying to come up with something to say, but no words came to his mind.

In the end, they both remained silent until the distant rumble announced the return of the dark sea.

Deep in the colossal crater, dark torrents appeared from beyond the horizon, rushing to fill it to the brim. A little bit stunned, Sunny watched as the water level rapidly rose, finally turning the endless chasm into a vast sea of black. Then, it began to overflow, sending an unstoppable flood of water into the wasteland.

Flowing past the Ashen Barrow, it rushed inland, crushing against the coral of the crimson labyrinth.

Soon, the whole world was covered in seething black water.

Sunny licked his dry lips and turned to Nephis. After a short pause, he said in a raspy voice:

"I think we found the source of the dark sea."

She lingered, watching the last rays of sunshine slowly disappear from the sky, then turned to him with a grim expression on her face.

"...Let's head back."

***

All three of them felt lost and heartbroken because of the terrible discovery. Cassie in particular seemed to be utterly shocked.

"It doesn't make sense, it just doesn't," she mumbled on their way to camp. "How could it be?"

Gripping Sunny's shoulder, she quickened her step and asked:

"Are you sure that there's nothing higher than the sea level out there? Are you absolutely sure?"

He sighed, feeling his mood turning even darker than before.

"Yes. We looked quite thoroughly. The whole land just goes down, down, and down. It stretches to the horizon, as far as we could see, in all directions except for the east. The Ashen Barrow is right on the edge."

The blind girl shook her head:

"But how could it be? I've seen that we had reached the castle! There must be a way!"

Sunny remained silent, not knowing how to answer. If there really was a way, he had no idea about it.

After a few seconds, Nephis answered instead of him:

"We will try to come up with something tomorrow. Worst… worst-case scenario, we'll have to go around the whole thing."

Sunny trembled at the thought. A journey like that would take months. To circle around the colossal crater, they would have to cover many times more distance than they had in the prior weeks, each day bringing the risk of stumbling onto something beyond their ability to resist.

And each night bringing the risk of something stumbling onto them…

The chances of surviving several months in this hellish place were nothing if not abyssal.

'Ha, ha. Abyssal...'

With a grimace, he tried to not think of the worst-case scenario. The darkness of the falling night was not the best environment for scary thoughts.

'Tomorrow. We'll rest, recharge, and think of something tomorrow. It is just like Cassie said… since she saw us entering the castle, there must be a way.'

They reached their temporary camp just before the sun had completely disappeared. Lying on the makeshift bed of fallen leaves, Sunny tiredly closed his eyes and thought:

'I hope I won't see any dreams today.'

Then, he slightly frowned.

'Dreams? Since when am I capable of dreaming in this place? Oh, right… there was that one dream… or was it a memory? What was it about again… huh, I can't seem to remember…'

With that thought disappearing from his mind, he fell asleep.

***

In the morning, the mood between the three of them was pretty somber. No one seemed to want to talk or do anything, aimlessly staring at the ground or the rustling leaves of the great tree.

In addition to the blow of yesterday's revelation, they were also hungry. The corpse of the Carapace Demon was starting to look more and more appealing, at least to Sunny. However, he was still not at the point of breaking his promise to Cassie.

Finally, Nephis broke the silence. Standing up, she looked up with grim resolution and said:

"I'm going to climb to the top of the tree and take a look around. Maybe I'll notice something that we missed from up high."

Sunny stared at the giant tree, suddenly feeling incredibly small. It was truly enormous. The Ashen Barrow itself was already much taller than the giant knight's statue and every other shelter they had seen, and the tree almost dwarfed it in size. Climbing all the way up would take a lot of time and effort.

But maybe she would really be able to notice something from that incredible height.

He scratched the back of his head and said:

"Alright. But be careful. Keep an eye on the sky. If you notice those winged abominations again, come back down."

Changing Star gave him a nod and headed for the tree. Without turning her head, she calmly said as a farewell:

"Take care of Cassie while I'm gone. It shouldn't be more than a few hours."

Sunny waved a hand and watch her walk away. Then, he tried to think of something to do.

On a usual day, he would have already started his morning training. But today, he was too hungry.

'Come on. Hunger is not an excuse. Do you think you'll always have a full stomach before a battle? No! So get up and train. Don't you want to try how the Midnight Shard feels in your hand?'

With a sigh, Sunny got up.

He trained for an hour, enjoying the swift and reliable feeling of his new sword. The long tachi was truly incredible. It was light, maneuverable, and unrelenting. Its edge sang as it cut the air. Sunny already felt as though it was a part of him.

His movements were fluid and measured, almost elegant.

After the training session was over, he decided to do something useful.

Walking over to the Carapace Demon's corpse, Sunny spent some time prying the soul shard out of it. In the end, he gathered all three of the crystals with some effort and stashed them into the seaweed rucksack.

What to do now?

After a bit of pondering, he suddenly got an idea and tried to find the place from his memory — the one where the Carapace Demon had dropped the transcendent soul shard into the sand. That shard had been brought to the Ashen Barrow by the subservient centurion and would be a real treat for Neph or Cassie.

He quickly found the right spot. However, no matter how hard Sunny looked, he couldn't find the alluring crystal. In the process, a couple more hours had passed by.

'Stange. It was quite large. Where could it be?'

He was determined to continue the search. But, at that moment, the shadow that he had left with Cassie noticed movement in the branches of the great tree.

Nephis was back.

Sunny walked back to the camp, thinking about what she had found. Was there hope for them after all? Or was there only more bad news?

By the time he returned, Neph and Cassie were sitting on the ground with relaxed expressions on their faces.

'She saw something?' Sunny thought, suddenly excited.

But in the next second, his eyes widened.

The two girls were holding something in their hands, their lips painted red. They were... eating.

They were eating the fruits of the great tree.

Chapter-77: Enthralled

Sunny stumbled and looked at his companions in utter shock.

Nephis and Cassie were each holding a large, round, glistening fruit. The skin of these fruits was smooth and black as onyx, while the succulent insides were red as ruby. Their hands, chins and lips were smeared with red juice, making it look as though they were feasting on blood.

The air was filled with an alluring, sweet aroma.

Sunny recoiled...

But his stomach involuntarily growled, reminding him how hungry he was.

Nephis looked at Sunny and offered him a relaxed smile.

"Hey."

He stared at her, lost for words. Finally, after a few seconds had passed, Sunny collected himself and screamed:

"What do you mean "hey"?! What the hell are you doing?!"

His voice was loud, full of disbelief and anger.

Both Neph and Cassie turned to face him. They were visibly confused.

"Why are you shouting?"

Sunny gaped at them, feeling like he had lost his mind. Why were they so nonchalant about this? What was going on here?!

Trying to find some sense in the situation, he took a cautious step forward and looked at Nephis. Did she… wait… what was he thinking about?

He was so hungry. It was hard to concentrate on anything except for food…

Shaking off the unexpected memory lapse, Sunny remembered what he was about to say and pressed:

"Why did you change your mind?"

Changing Star frowned.

"Changed my mind? About what?"

He clenched his teeth, thinking that she was trying to fool him.

"About the fruits! I thought we had agreed to avoid eating them!"

Nephis blinked, a confused expression appearing on her face.

"Did we? ...Why?"

Sunny opened his mouth to answer, but then froze.

Actually, why did they make that agreement?

'Uh… I can't quite remember.'

He was sure that there was a reason, but his memory was completely blank. There definitely was an agreement… wasn't there?

He was pretty sure that there was, at least up until a few moments ago. Now, however… huh… did he imagine the whole thing? There really was no reason not to eat the alluring fruits. Especially when the three of them were so hungry…

'No, wait… that's not right!'

"Are you alright, Sunny?"

He flinched and glanced at Nephis, who was looking at him with concern. Suddenly, Sunny felt lost and confused. What were they talking about? Something… something about some sort of agreement?

What agreement?

Not knowing how to answer, he just stood there with a frown on his face and pouted.

'Ugh, this is embarrassing. Did I completely space out while she was talking to me?'

Fortunately, Cassie quickly came to his rescue. She always knew how to make the situation less awkward.

"Are you angry because we started eating without you?"

He looked at her and noticed the big, delicious fruit in her hands. His stomach growled.

'So hungry…'

"Uh… I guess?"

Cassie smiled and pointed to the ground, where another fruit was placed on the pile of fallen leaves. Her teeth were smeared with red juice.

"Don't worry! Neph brought three of them, one for each."

'How nice of her…'

Sunny picked up the fruit, looked at it, and took a bite without thinking.

Instantly, his mouth was filled with delightful, cool sweetness. The succulent, juicy fruit was probably the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. It was both nourishing and refreshing, with rich texture and soft, lingering aftertaste. The ruby flesh practically melted on his tongue, making his whole body tingle. It was pure joy in the form of a fruit.

'Wow!'

Despite his delight, Sunny felt disturbed for some reason. Something was very wrong about the whole situation… but what?

Taking another bite, he frowned and tried to understand the source of this anxious feeling. It was hard to think about anything except for how heavenly the fruit of the Soul Tree tasted, but he forced himself to concentrate.

'Huh… Soul Tree? Since when... wait, don't get distracted...'

Sunny was finally able to pinpoint the source of the strangeness. It was his shadow. When he reached out to pick up the fruit, the shadow did not copy his movements, as though reluctant to touch it.

Even now it was motionless, refusing to mimic him eating the fruit.

'Weird. What is it with this guy?'

Sunny took one more bite and looked at the shadow, lost in thought.

The shadow had an eccentric temper, but it rarely did something without a reason. If it didn't like the fruit, there had to be something wrong with… the… fruit…

Sunny frowned, suddenly feeling a sense of dread grip his heart.

There was something… something wrong with the…

'Damn, why is it so hard to think about this stuff?!'

There was something wrong with the fruit? Why would there…

'Wait, is this why I screamed at Nephis? She broke an agreement… what was the agreement?'

Sunny was at the precipice of remembering something very important. He felt as though he just needed to pull on the thread, and the whole truth would reveal itself…

Something terrible was going to happen if he failed...

But then, Sunny got distracted.

Something unexpected happened, something that required his full attention.

Instantly, he somehow forgot all about the problem with the Soul Tree's fruits.

Because at that moment, the Spell was talking into his ear:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Wh—what?'

He blinked, then looked at the delicious fruit in his hands. The Spell announced the increase in his power right after Sunny swallowed his third bite.

Stunned, he raised his head and looked at Nephis.

Changing Star, too, was staring at her fruit with a strange expression on her face. Feeling his gaze, she looked up.

Sunny licked his lips.

"Did you…"

At the same time, Nephis said:

"I just absorbed a point of soul essence."

Without saying anything, they both turned to Cassie.

The blind girl was enthusiastically devouring the fruit. Red juice was flowing down her chin and dripping to the ground.

Stopping for a moment, she smiled.

"Actually, I received mine a few bites ago."

Sunny's eyes widened. Excitedly, he summoned the runes and found the right cluster:

Shadow Fragments: [97/1000].

He really received a fragment!

He received a shadow fragment without risking his life in a battle against deadly monsters!

Finally, Sunny was able to realize why the Carapace Demon had been so fixated on the Soul Tree and its fruits.

These fruits were pure magic!

Forgetting all about the uneasy feeling, he raised his hand and greedily bit into the succulent, delicious, nourishing flesh…

***

Late in the evening, when the sun was already hidden behind the horizon and the dark sea had once again turned the Ashen Barrow into a lonely island, the three of them were preparing for the night.

They had moved their camp to rest between the roots of the great tree. With newfound energy received from consuming miraculous fruits, all their worries seemed to fade.

With no way to move further west, Nephis, Sunny and Cassie had decided to rest for a few days before making any decisions.

They deserved a short vacation.

The Ashen Barrows was a perfect place to recuperate. There were no monsters in the surrounding wasteland, it was large enough to protect them from the horrors of the sea, and they had plenty of food thanks to the Soul Tree.

What's more, that food could even provide them with power…

Where else would they be able to grow stronger without risking their lives?

As far as hell goes, this place was almost a paradise.

Sunny lay on the makeshift mattress of fallen leaves, feeling relaxed and optimistic for the first time in many, many days.

Things seemed to be getting better.

Before falling asleep, he glanced at the mighty branches of the great tree and thought with a bit of regret:

'With the Carapace Demon gone, there's no one to protect this magnificent tree anymore. When we continue our journey, it will be completely defenseless. What a shame…'

His consciousness was already half-asleep. However, one last thought entered Sunny's mind right before he completely slipped into the embrace of darkness:

"What a shame that no one will be here to serve it.... and feed it... and help it spread its seeds…"

Chapter-78: Bliss

In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the gentle rustling of leaves. Opening his eyes, he saw rays of sunshine falling through the scarlet crown of the Soul Tree, painting the world in soft shades of pink. The sight was beautiful and tranquil. It felt as though none of the dangers and terrors of the Dream Realm could reach him here.

A soft breeze touched his skin, bringing with it coolness and the smell of fallen leaves.

For the first time in a long while, Sunny felt at peace.

'Is this what a vacation feels like?'

If so, their decision to have one was the best decision ever.

He sat up with a yawn and lazily looked around. Cassie and Nephis were already awake. Seeing them put a smile on Sunny's face.

'Why the hell am I grinning?'

Shaking his head, Sunny put on a serious expression and said:

"Good morning."

The girls greeted him. Then, Nephis slightly tilted her head and asked:

"Hey. Do you remember why we didn't leave anyone to keep watch last night?"

Sunny blinked. Indeed, why hadn't anyone guarded the camp?

"Uh. No. I guess we were too tired? Plus, it's so safe here. Why deprive ourselves of sleep?"

She frowned. Sunny expected Changing Star to berate them, but, unexpectedly, she just shrugged.

"...I guess."

'Huh. That's not like her. Am I not the only one in a great mood?'

To make Neph feel better, he pointed down and said:

"Don't worry. My shadow would have warned us if anything had happened ."

She seemed to have forgotten about her question already, returning to whatever she had been doing before. All three of them were easily distracted these days. Sunny sighed.

"So… what are you guys going to do today?"

Cassie turned to him with a smile and answered in a teasing tone:

"Nothing! We're on vacation, remember? So we're just going to rest and relax."

'Sounds like a plan. Speaking about plans…'

At that moment, Cassie scowled and said with a comically strict expression:

"You too, Sunny! You are not allowed to plan, plot and scheme. Just sit back and enjoy the day. Alright?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Alright."

He felt as though he was forgetting something.

But what?

Looking at Nephis, Sunny hesitated and asked:

"Remind me, why did you climb the Soul Tree yesterday?"

She glanced at him in confusion.

"Uh… I don't really remember. To get the fruits?"

Sunny smiled at the mention of the miraculous fruits and nodded.

'Yeah. That makes sense…'

***

A few days passed by. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie spent them idling away, not concerned with anything in the world.

Their tired bodies and minds needed time to rest.

They slept until noon, ate the delightful fruits and sat around the fire, talking or simply soaking in the warmth. Sometimes, they would play games or engage in other forms of entertainment.

Other times, they would keep to themselves, enjoying the almost forgotten feeling of privacy. Sunny had been a loner for most of his life, so these past few weeks that he had spent side by side with other people, without even a minute to himself, were a taxing experience. He relished the opportunity to be alone with his thoughts once again.

Luckily, the island was large enough for the three of them to stay apart if they didn't wish to be disturbed.

Not that it happened often.

At first, he had expected that lazing around doing nothing would very quickly grow boring, but surprisingly, it did not. He felt perfectly fine simply laying on the ground and staring at the gently swaying branches of the Soul Tree, caught in a blissful reverie. In moments like these, he would lose track of time, often realizing that entire hours had passed only when the sun was about to set.

The concept of time, in general, had become strangely hard to grasp. Sunny wasn't entirely sure how many days they had spent on the peaceful island. He was pretty sure that it was less than a week, but couldn't remember the exact amount.

Not being able to remember something had become a common occurrence. All three of them were turning increasingly absentminded and forgetful. Sometimes, Sunny would catch himself straining to remember details of his previous life or notice the strangeness of their behavior. But a minute later, he would forget about these concerns, distracted by some innocuous thought or occurrence.

His memory was becoming hazier and hazier. The only clear things in it were how delicious and refreshing the magical fruits were, how pleasant it was to live under the shade of the Soul Tree, and how magnificent it was.

The Tree was beautiful, benevolent and generous. It protected them from the cursed blight of the crimson labyrinth, kept the monsters away and provided nourishment both for their bodies and for their soul cores. Sunny was becoming increasingly convinced that finding the majestic Soul Tree was a true blessing.

The thought of leaving its gifts behind and returning to the horror of the outside world seemed less and less attractive.

Why leave when they were perfectly happy here?

Well… at least two of them were.

While Nephis was as carefree and tranquil as Sunny and Cassie in the beginning, as time went by, she grew strangely despondent and gloomy. It seemed as though she had reverted back to her old, distant and unsociable self.

Instead of chatting or relaxing with them, Changing Star ended up spending most of her time sitting on the western edge of the island alone, staring into the distance with bleak eyes. Sunny had no idea what was wrong.

He was worried about her. Not even the frequent, insistent lapses of memory managed to overcome his concern about Neph.

On one of the evenings, Sunny approached the western slope of the island, feeling as though his head was about to split from pain. For some reason, he kept forgetting the reason for this visit on the way here. It took all of his willpower to hold on to his intentions.

He wanted to check on Nephis.

Just like always, she was sitting at the ridge of the western edge, gazing into the distance. Sunny climbed onto the ridge and sat down, looking at her with hesitation.

"Hey, Neph."

Changing Star glanced at him. Her indifferent expression was back, making any attempt to understand her true emotions futile.

However, it was clear that she was not alright.

"Hey."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

Was he seeing things, or was her hair a bit longer than before?

"Why aren't you enjoying the vacation?"

Changing Star frowned. After a while, she said:

"Don't we... need to keep moving west?"

He raised his eyebrows, surprised.

"West? What is in the west?"

Neph's frown deepened, turning into a scowl.

"I… I don't remember. But I feel… I feel…"

She grew silent, then said quietly:

"I feel like I have to do something very important."

'Abandon the Soul Tree... what a strange idea.'

Sunny pondered for some time, trying to understand where she got the idea that they had to move somewhere. Finally, he asked:

"Why west, of all directions?"

Nephis turned to him. There was a strange, pained expression on her face. Gritting her teeth, she whispered:

"I don't know."

Sunny sighed.

If she didn't know, then he, of course, had no idea either. All he knew was that he wanted to make her feel better.

But how?

Sunny frowned, trying to think of a way. He felt that there was something very obvious that he was forgetting. Something that would instantly erase Neph's suffering...

When the realization hit him, he froze.

'Of course! How could I forget...'

The answer was so clear. He just had to climb the Soul Tree and find an especially juicy fruit for her to eat...

Chapter-79: Twist of Fate

It was already dark when Sunny returned to the great tree. Cassie was asleep, snuggled comfortably under her cloak. There was a peaceful smile on her face.

'Sweet dreams.'

She wasn't bothered by her terrible visions in a long time. Everything became better since they decided to stay on the tranquil island.

…Everything except for Neph's mood. She didn't even bother to return to camp today, staying at the western edge of the barrow. Sunny didn't like that she was so close to the black water.

He sighed.

'I need to get some tasty fruits for her as soon as possible.'

She definitely would not be able to stay sad after eating the magical fruits. They were so sweet and delicious! Sunny began salivating just from thinking about them.

'...Maybe I'll find one for myself, too.'

In the beginning, they took turns climbing to the lower branches of the Soul Tree to gather fruits. Lately, though, Nephis seemed to be distracted by her strange melancholy. As the result, the group relied on him to bring down fruits for everyone.

He had already picked the lowest branches clean, choosing the ripest fruits first. Later ones were smaller and not as heavenly, although they still tasted amazing. Since each fruit was big enough to satiate a person for a long time, they rarely ate more than one in a day. The ripest fruits provided Sunny with one or two shadow fragments, while the smaller ones gave one or even none at all.

'I wonder how many shadow fragments I accumulated. Should be more than a hundred, right? Maybe even one hundred and ten… no, no way. We've been here just for a few days, a week at most.'

He could just summon the runes and check, but somehow that thought didn't even occur to him.

…If it did, he would have been horrified.

Forgetting all about the shadow fragments, Sunny looked up and scratched the back of his head. Initially, he was planning to climb the tree in the morning and explore higher than he had previously gone, looking for the best, most delicious fruit possible to give to Neph. But after thinking about it, he decided to not wait until the night was over.

He could see perfectly in the dark, after all. And this way, he would be able to give Changing Star a delightful present much sooner.

Stepping close to the trunk of the miraculous tree, Sunny began climbing. The first stretch was the most difficult since he had nothing to grab except for small cracks and bumps on the smooth, obsidian bark. Reaching the branches required a lot of effort.

However, he was already accustomed to it. Moving his hands and feet almost on instinct, Sunny got higher and higher. Soon, he was already pulling himself on top of an enormous, wide branch.

These first branches were as wide as roads. He sat down and rested for some time, enjoying the coolness of the night air.

Sunny had never climbed the Soul Tree in the dark before. Without the bright sunbeams falling through the leaves, it looked strangely different. The vibrant magnificence was gone, replaced with eerie stillness.

The rustling of scarlet leaves did not seem calming and tranquil anymore. In fact, it made Sunny shudder. It sounded like... thousands and thousands of trapped souls, all screaming in agony.

'What's up with me today? How can I even think of such things? What a fool! Good thing that the great tree can't hear me — otherwise, I'd be so ashamed. Please forgive me, Soul Tree…'

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up and continued climbing. He was very disappointed in himself. After all the good things that the tree had given them, he had stupidly doubted its benevolence… its greatness… its desire to devour… always ravenous, always growing… starving, hungry… forever…

How ungrateful.

Why did he even begin to think about… huh… what exactly was he thinking about?

Sunny frowned, failing to recall his train of thought.

'Ugh, whatever. I'm here to find a tasty fruit for Neph, not practice my reasoning.'

Climbing higher and higher, he soon abandoned the area that they had explored before. The crown of the great tree was vast enough to form a maze of its own. The large branches grew chaotically in all directions, twisting and crossing each other, with thick foliage blocking lines of sight and making any attempt of looking for the fruits difficult and time-consuming.

Still, Sunny was determined to continue. He figured that if he went really high, where sunlight was denser, the fruits would be much riper.

They had never tried a fruit from the higher branches. If he could find a really amazing one, Nephis would have to change her mind and abandon her strange thoughts of leaving the island. After all, these fruits were magical. Maybe she'll even smile!

Encouraged, Sunny continued climbing.

Time slowly passed. After a long while, Sunny finally decided that he had climbed high enough. He wasn't sure how many hours ago he had started the ascent, but judging by the soreness of his muscles and the visibly diminished width of the branches, he was somewhere in the upper part of the tree.

Stepping on one of the branches, he slowly walked forward and looked from side to side. Searching for the fruits was not easy. It required good perception and patience.

…And a great sense of equilibrium, of course! Falling from this height would not be a great experience. In fact, it would be his last.

Carefully observing the surroundings, Sunny moved further and further away from the trunk of the great tree. The branches were softly swaying under his feet. A few times, he jumped from one to another, causing a change in the melody of rustling leaves.

On the way, he noticed several hanging fruits. They looked ripe and delicious, but none of them was really special. And he wanted to find the most wonderful fruit possible.

Finally, Sunny got so far that the branches grew really narrow and thin. Now, they were almost the same size as those of a normal tree, barely able to support his weight.

But he still did not find a suitable gift for Nephis.

Sunny helplessly looked around, crestfallen. He really thought that he would be able to.

Then, he noticed something strange.

Some distance away from him, the branches just above the one he was standing on were twisted downward, as though weighed down by something. However, he couldn't quite see what it was behind the almost impenetrable wall of leaves.

In fact, he only noticed the anomaly because it was dark. In the light of day, the bright color of the Soul Tree's foliage would make the shape of the branches indiscernible. But in Sunny's night vision, all colors were muted, almost turning into various shades of grey.

'Interesting.'

Jumping, he grabbed onto a higher branch and pulled himself up. Then, careful not to fall, Sunny approached the leaf barrier and forced his way through. In the process, he had to enhance his strength and agility with the help of the shadow — otherwise, he would either have had to turn back or tumbled down to his death.

Finally, he freed himself from the last layer of leaves and took a step forward.

Then, Sunny froze, his eyes opening wide with wonder.

Right in front of him, hidden from the world in the secretive pocket of twisted branches, a giant, elaborate bird nest rested between the scarlet leaves.

Chapter-80: Spirit of Exploration

The nest was spherical in shape, with a round hole at the center of it. Usually, such a nest would be made out of grass and twigs, but this one was constructed from the branches of the great tree, each at least as thick as a man's arm. These branches were twisted and interwoven together in a chaotic pattern, creating gapless, onyx-black walls.

Sunny had never seen anything like it. Birds were a rare sight in the real world, let alone giant ones. The size of the entrance into the nest was large enough for a small truck to pass through. The nest itself was several times bigger.

'Wow.'

For a second, he felt a sense of fear, afraid that the giant bird was somewhere near. But then his fears disappeared.

The nest looked… abandoned. It was ancient and empty, some of its parts already on the verge of collapse. It was as though thousands of years had passed since anyone had been in this hidden, secretive place. The air was filled with the feeling of lonesomeness and desolation.

'Makes sense. If I barely managed to pass through the leaves, how would a giant monster do it without leaving a giant hole in the barrier?'

Sunny hesitated, caution and curiosity wrestling against each other inside his heart. On one hand, exploring ancient nests was not the best of ideas anywhere, let alone inside the Dream Realm. It posed great risks.

On the other hand, it also could lead to a great reward. Plus… wasn't it just too damn interesting?

In the end, Sunny decided to climb inside the nest to satiate his curiosity. He had convinced himself that it was safe following an unexpected train of thought. In his warped state of mind, Sunny was convinced that the Soul Tree was a great and

benevolent being, one that protected them from the terrible threats hiding in the outside world.

If so, how could anything having to do with the great tree be unsafe?

Moving closer to the entrance of the nest, he balanced on the edge of the branch and tried to look inside. However, he wasn't tall enough to see anything except for the inner side of the nest's roof. Since his position was pretty precarious, Sunny decided not to delay the inevitable and jumped, throwing himself up and over the lip of the entrance.

A moment later, he landed on a soft surface. The lower part of the nest was covered in a thick cushion of white, silky spiderwebs. Time had made them brittle and pliable like sand. There was so much spiderweb around that, for a moment, Sunny thought that he had fallen into a giant white cocoon.

But no, it was just a nest.

And there, in the center of it, was a…

Sunny blinked.

At the center of the nest, there was an egg. A giant, ancient egg that was as tall as he was, grey and seemingly lifeless, as though turned to stone by the passage of time.

Forgetting to breathe, Sunny looked around, making sure that there was nothing… and no one… else around. But no, the giant nest was empty and silent, with not even a stray shadow hiding anywhere in sight.

'How… fascinating.'

Sunny felt strangely excited. The feeling of discovering something incredible, something that no one except for him had ever seen, filled him with a deep sense of wonder and satisfaction. He had never known that there was such a side to him, one full of an explorer's passion.

'Let's check this thing out.'

Walking on the soft silk, Sunny slowly circled the massive egg and studied it. At a first glance, it seemed to be made of stone. The surface of the egg was colored in various shades of grey, which were overlaid over each other like moving clouds. This pattern was strangely beautiful, giving the egg a mysterious aura. But overall, it was just big and smooth.

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then stepped closer and put his hand on the surface of the egg. Immediately, he felt a strong sense of astonishment.

The egg was warm to the touch.

'Is it… still alive?'

In the next second, Sunny felt a strange pull affecting his core. It was as though the egg was… was trying to steal his life force!

He jerked his hand away and looked at the egg with dark apprehension. The damned thing was not only alive, but also capable of sucking the life out of anything that touched it. It only failed to eat his soul because of one reason.

As far as Sunny knew, he was the only existence in two worlds without an actual soul core. He had the mysterious Shadow Core instead. That's why his life force had not been affected.

'Phew. That was close.'

Looking at the giant egg, Sunny thought about how to get back at it.

The nest, without a doubt, once belonged to an extremely powerful Nightmare Creature. Therefore, its spawn was also a being of considerable strength. However, due to some unknown reason, that being had not been able to hatch and was left behind by its parent, destined to remain trapped within the egg for all eternity.

…Or at least until some unfortunate fool came close enough to feed it with soul essence and give it enough power to break free.

'Luckily, I'm not a fool. Wait… uh… maybe I am…'

His decisions have been very strange lately. He couldn't quite explain some of them, including this latest one. It was as though his thinking ability had been reduced…

'Whatever. I'm still smarter than a damn egg!'

Like a true explorer, he went where no one had gone before and made an incredible discovery. He found an unbelievably mysterious, rare being, one that not a single human had ever heard of.

Naturally, he had to kill it.

That's what the spirit of exploration was all about, wasn't it?

Summoning the Midnight Shard, Sunny thrust it into the stone surface of the egg, causing a rain of sparks to fall on the spiderwebs. The sharp blade slid harmlessly across the stone, leaving only a shallow scratch on it.

'Tough bastard.'

The egg was sturdy enough to withstand a strike from an Awakened weapon. If it was that resilient, Sunny was scared to imagine how powerful the adult monster would be. It was definitely not an average Nightmare Creature.

But then, he was not an average Sleeper.

His shadow flowed from his hands onto the Midnight Shard, turning the polished metal of the blade black and lusterless. Immediately, a cold aura radiated from the sword, making it feel sharp enough to cut the world apart.

Stepping forward, Sunny raised the Shard above his head and sliced down, delivering a crushing blow. Enhanced by the shadow, the dark blade bit into the stone surface of the egg and split it apart.

Cracks ran through the giant stone egg as Sunny's sword plunged into it. A flash of sinister crimson light shined through the cracks, then disappeared, leaving behind nothing but darkness. A torrent of viscous, black liquid flowed onto the white spiderwebs.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny heard the Spell's bewitching voice:

[You have slain a Great Devil, Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory…]

Chapter-81: Weaver's Eye

Sunny blinked.

[You have received a Memory: Drop of Ichor.]

'Wait a moment… wait a moment…'

A Great Devil? He gulped.

Nightmare Creature with four soul cores was called a devil, just one class below the dreaded tyrant. From that detail alone, the evil ancient egg had been potentially more powerful than the Carapace Demon.

However, what shocked him the most was its rank, not class.

The quality of most things having to do with the Nightmare Spell followed a similar hierarchy, from Dormant to Awakened, Ascended, Transcendent, Supreme, Sacred and Divine.

Humans had only ever managed to reach the Transcendent rank. These heroes were known as Saints, each wielding an unimaginable amount of power and leading humanity in its war against the Nightmare Creatures.

The Nightmare Creatures, too, were different from each other in a similar fashion, with seven ranks of power. They were, in order of growing strength: Dormant, Awakened, Fallen, Corrupted, Great, Cursed and Unholy.

A Great Devil, therefore, was a Nightmare Creature with four soul cores, each one of the Great rank. Which were the same in terms of power as a Supreme soul core would have been if a human ever managed to pass the Fourth Nightmare and rise one step above the Saints.

…Sunny had just killed one of the most powerful Nightmare Creatures to ever fall by a human hand. At least as far as he knew. Victories against the Great Devils were rare enough to be of historic importance.

'Uh…'

What a stroke of luck, to find one absolutely defenseless, yet to be fully born and weakened by thousands of years of neglect. Not to mention the fact that he was probably the only human alive to be partially immune to the egg's terrifying life-sucking powers.

'Wait… how many shadow fragments did I get?'

Sunny felt stronger… a lot stronger…

He was used to receiving two fragments for each awakened beast he killed. Thus, it was fair to assume that a Fallen beast would give him four, a Corrupted beast would give him eight, and a Great beast would give him sixteen — forgetting the ridiculousness of the notion that a Sleeper would ever be able to slay a great beast.

However, the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn was not a beast, it was a devil. It had four cores, so… sixty-four fragments?!

Dumbstruck, Sunny summoned the runes. In his excited state, he even disregarded the insistent forgetfulness that prevented him from doing so earlier.

Shadow Fragments: [196/1000].

After seeing the number, he was giddy with joy at first. But then, Sunny frowned.

'Wait, that doesn't make any sense. I had ninety-six fragments before coming to the Ashen Barrow. I received sixty-four just now, that makes it hundred and sixty. Where did the additional thirty-six fragments come from? From the fruits? No way… we've been eating them for less than a week, one fruit a day.

To get that much… a whole month would have to pass…'

But how could so much time pass without him noticing? Yes, his memory was strange lately… but…

Sunny tried to concentrate on the discrepancy, but it was very hard, for some reason. The more he thought about it, the less clear he became on what exactly he was thinking about.

'Uh… what was I trying to remember? Something about the shadow fragments? Yeah…'

A few minutes later, he massaged his temples and sighed in frustration.

'I guess I was trying to calculate how many fragments I got from killing that vile egg. It's sixty-four. What is there to think about? That is great!'

He would spend more time celebrating the insane amount of shadow fragments he had received, but there was another amazing thing waiting for his attention.

A Memory. He had actually received a Memory from a Great Devil! A real, actual Supreme Memory of the fourth tier. That was… that was…

'Fantastic!'

Sunny summoned the runes once more and looked at his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Drop of Ichor].

Hurriedly, he concentrated on the new one.

Memory: [Drop of Ichor].

Memory Rank: unknown

Memory Type: unknown

Memory Description: [The loathsome Thieving Bird was hated both by the gods and -unknown-. However, it only cared about shiny things. Enamored by Weaver's beautiful eyes, it stole one of them on a dark, starless night. Impatient, the vile creature looked at its bounty while still in flight.

However, when it saw the reflection of -unknown- forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupil, it went mad and screamed, dropping the eye on the mortal realm below. All that was left in its greedy beak was one drop of pure, golden ichor.]

Sunny frowned.

What the hell was that?

He had never heard of a Memory with an unknown rank and type. How was this even possible? Did the Spell really not know or was it simply refusing to let him know? Why would it do that?

And the description itself… what were these words that it failed to translate? He tried to forego the automatic translation and look at the runes themselves, but they were

beyond his ability to translate. In fact, he had never seen runes of this type before. Weirdly, studying them caused him to feel dizzy and nauseated.

'That is… very, very weird.'

Also, to his shame, Sunny had to admit that he had no idea what the word "ichor" meant. It simply wasn't in his vocabulary. Maybe if he went to school and got an education like other Sleepers, he would know.

Sunny hesitated for a minute or two, then cautiously summoned the strange Memory. Instantly, golden sparks of light appeared in the air in front of him, coalescing into a spherical drop of radiant, golden liquid.

'What am I supposed to do with thi…'

Before he finished his thought, the Spell spoke again. Its voice sounded a bit strange. It was almost… excited?

[You have acquired a drop of ichor. Do you wish to consume it?]

Sunny blinked.

Consume… a Memory?

Things were getting weirder and weirder.

He hesitated.

What was going to happen if he did consume it? Memories were rewards given by the Spell to the Awakened. As such, they were usually useful, very rarely useless, and never harmful. At least that was the common knowledge. However… this one was out of the ordinary. And it was the Spell he was talking about.

The damn thing was nothing if not unpredictable… usually with catastrophic consequences.

The safest approach would be to put the golden liquid back into his Soul Sea and never touch it again.

But it was a Memory received from a Great Devil! Chances were he would never hold another one in his whole life, not even in his dreams.

Sunny was simply unwilling to let this opportunity go.

Trying to calm his rapidly beating heart, he licked his lips and said:

"Yes. I want to consume it."

[As you wish.]

The golden sphere separated into two streams of beautiful, radiant liquid. The streams flowed through the air, approaching Sunny's face. He felt a gentle touch caress his cheeks.

Then, the golden liquid reached his eyes and flowed through them, entering his soul through the pupils.

Soon, it was gone.

Sunny was frozen, not knowing what to expect.

A second passed, then another.

He raised his trembling hands to his face, finally feeling something.

In the next moment, Sunny opened his mouth and let out a terrible, wailing shriek as unimaginable, blinding pain tore through his entire being.

Chapter-82: Fear of the Unknown

Sunny fell into the soft embrace of spiderwebs, screaming, his whole body convulsing in spasms of terrible pain. The unbearable agony radiated through his nervous system, his mind drowning in the endless torrent of torturous, excruciating, harrowing suffering.

It felt as though every muscle, every fiber, every molecule of his body was being torn apart and reassembled, only to be torn apart again. His eyes, especially, felt as though there were two white-hot metal rods inserted in them, making all the other pain pale in comparison. Or maybe they had become searing spheres of molten metal themselves…

He clawed at his face, leaving bloody marks on it. However, seconds later they were already gone, erased by some unknown force. His voice was soon gone, too, leaving Sunny without an outlet to express his horrible torment.

The process was the opposite of the gentle rebirth he had experienced after passing the First Nightmare. It was violent, ruthless and unnatural, forcefully reshaping Sunny's body into something that it was not meant to be.

That nothing was ever meant to be.

Powerless to stop it, Sunny had no choice but to endure the agony. All he could do was try not to go mad from pain. Tears were streaming down his face, leaving bloody trails in their wake. There was no end to torture.

…Then, after what felt like an eternity, there was. The pain subsided, lessened, and finally vanished. Sunny was left lying on the thick carpet of spiderwebs, utterly drained and depleted.

In the silence that was broken only by the hoarse sound of his ragged breathing, the Spell's voice whispered:

[You have acquired a new Attribute.]

[One of your Attributes is ready to evolve.]

***

Sunny remained motionless for a long time, slowly coming back to his senses. The memory of the terrible ordeal was still echoing in his mind, making him shudder from time to time. He was afraid to open his eyes and look at his body, afraid to see himself changed in some horrific, repulsive way.

'Have I become a monster?'

Feeling a sense of dread, Sunny shut his eyes tighter.

However, he did not feel like a monster. In fact, he didn't feel different at all. From what he could tell, he still had two hands, two legs, and soft human skin. There was no change in his strength and resilience.

It was as though nothing had happened.

'Come on. Just do it…'

With a nervous sigh, Sunny opened his eyes and looked himself over. Everything was the same. He shifted his perception and studied himself again through the shadow.

He was still human.

Well… something did change, but he couldn't quite describe it. It was as though his vision was slightly different from before. The world seemed… deeper, somehow. Sunny only noticed the difference because of the contrast between his own perception and that of the shadow.

Previously, they were more or less similar.

'A drop of ichor… that came from the Weaver's eye…'

Carefully, he raised a hand and touched his eyes. They felt the same.

But they were also different. He just couldn't understand in what way.

Lowering his hand, Sunny noticed a drop of blood on one of his fingers. It came from a small scratch on his cheek, one that had not healed like the others.

Deep inside his blood, Sunny noticed a barely visible hint of the golden shine. As if the radiant drop of golden liquid he had absorbed was still there, now a part of him,

strongly diluted and fused into his own bloodstream. The shine was so faint that he had almost missed it.

Sunny suspected that in the light, it wouldn't be visible at all.

'What… the hell… have I done to myself?'

That was the moment when he accidentally glanced at the Pupetter's Shroud, simultaneously thinking about the golden shine. Something switched in Sunny's head, and suddenly, he saw the Memory differently.

His eyes widened.

Under the surface of the grey fabric, five glowing embers were shining with ethereal light. Each of them represented a nexus and anchor of countless diamond strings that stretched to different parts of the armor, weaving an intricate, elaborate, unpredictable pattern.

It looked a lot like the inner void of the Spell, only at an infinitely smaller scale.

However… Sunny was surprised to find out that he sort of understood the pattern. A newly found innate knowledge helped him sense the traces of logic behind the seemingly chaotic placement of the strings, a defined purpose behind every twist and turn. They were meant to achieve certain effects… durability, resilience… and another, more complex type of protection.

The hint of understanding came naturally to him, as though it was his innate ability.

'I need to... study this further.'

Intrigued and apprehensive, he entered the Soul Sea. A familiar dark expanse of still water appeared in front of his mind's eye. There was the looming Shadow Core, the shining satellites of his Memories, and the strange feeling that something was moving just beyond the periphery of his vision.

Out of habit, Sunny turned his head to try and catch sight of that something, knowing that he would not see anything.

However, this time, he did.

With a startled yelp, Sunny flinched away and lost his balance.

'What the hell! What the actual hell!'

Out there in the darkness, at the border of the dim light cast by the shining Memories, stood motionless black figures. They were shadows… shadows of creatures he had killed.

There was a shadow that resembled the slave with broad shoulders and bloodied back, one whose name Sunny had never bothered to learn. His figure was deformed and horrifying, as he had been transformed into a murderous beast after becoming the host of a Mountain King's Larva. That Larva was then strangled by Sunny.

The shadow of the Mountain King itself was towering above him, just as dreadful and abhorrent as the tyrant had been when still alive. Sunny shuddered as he remembered escaping from the horrid creature's claws.

The shadow of the cruel slaver that had hit him with the whip was also there, standing beside the tyrant. This was the first, and for now the only, human whose life Sunny had ended with his own two hands. He even stole the boots and cloak of the dead man's body.

On both sides of them, there were other shadows. Hulking carapace scavengers stood silently, their pincers lowered to the ground. A fearsome centurion's savage silhouette could be seen among them, surrounded by the giant centipedes, bulbous knots of carnivorous worms and a few strange, maneating flowers.

Every single being that had fallen by Sunny's hand was there in the form of a shadow. Or, to be more precise, every being whose shadow's fragments had been absorbed by him.

Despite the fact that shadows had no eyes, he couldn't help but feel that they were all staring at him…

Silent, motionless. Watching.

Feeling cold shivers running down his spine, Sunny gulped and stood up, his legs shaking a little. Finding out that a small army of dead shadows had appeared inside your Soul Sea was not the most pleasant of surprises. Let alone if those shadows once belonged to creatures who you had personally slain.

He clenched his teeth.

'Can I repeat… what the actual hell?!'

Chapter-83: Five

The shadows stared at Sunny, and Sunny stared at the shadows.

After a while, the situation became a bit awkward.

Sunny shifted a little, then hesitantly asked:

"Uh… are you guys not going to do anything?"

The shadows did not react, remaining as motionless and quiet as they had been from the start.

As a matter of fact, he didn't see them move or show any sign of life at all. In that regard, they were even more lifeless than his Echo had been here in the Sea of Soul. Sunny scratched his head.

His initial fear was slowly disappearing. At first, he was scared out of his wits, but more so from being startled than from feeling an actual threat. This was his Soul Sea, after all. Very few things could harm him here.

Sunny was pretty sure that the shadows were not capable of doing anything, let alone attacking him. They seemed more like manifestations of some weird facet of his Aspect rather than actual beings. As such, they weren't dangerous.

The question was… why did the shadows suddenly appear?

After briefly thinking about it, Sunny came to the conclusion that they did not actually appear, per se. Instead, they were always here, it's just that he had not been able to see them.

But now, with his eyes changed by the strange transformation he had gone through, he could, just like he could see the diamond strings inside the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Speaking of the Puppeteer's Shroud…

Glancing at the silent shadows one last time to make sure that they would not lunge at him, Sunny frowned with suspicion and turned away. His back instantly began to tingle.

'Just think of them as fashionable pieces of furniture. Who says Soul Seas don't need a touch of interior design?'

Somewhat consoled, he walked closer to the shining spheres that represented Memories and summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. One of the spheres floated down and slowly dimmed, revealing the armor within.

Just like before, Sunny could see five glowing nexuses and countless strings permeating the grey fabric. They resembled miniature stars assembled into a constellation.

'The Shroud came from a tyrant, which is a class of Nightmare Creatures with five soul cores. Five soul cores, fifth tier Memory, five nexuses… makes sense.'

For some reason, the number five moved something in his mind. Sunny scowled, not understanding the feeling of unease that suddenly appeared out of nowhere and disrupted the flow of his thoughts.

Trying to concentrate on the task at hand, he summoned the runes describing the Puppeteer's Shroud. The familiar description appeared in the air around the armor:

Memory: [Puppeteer's Shroud].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: V.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [A worm of doubt…]

The identification of the tier was new. It seems that the Spell decided to be helpful and incorporated Sunny's new understanding of the inner workings of Memories into its… uh… interface?

Tiers were not something that humans had learned from the Spell. Instead, it was just an improvised way of differentiating Memories of different power levels within the same rank. It was often unreliable and outright wrong, but it was better than nothing.

But in the case of Sunny, the information was one hundred percent true. He could confirm it with his own two eyes just by counting the number of core remnants inside a

Memory. He could even understand their purpose.

'That might be extremely useful!'

However, his attention was drawn to something else. At the very bottom of the description, a new cluster of runes appeared.

Memory Enchantments: [Enhanced Durability], [Doubtless].

Sunny smiled. That was what he was hoping for. Previously, he had only been able to intuitively sense the special qualities of his Memories, with no way to learn their true nature and limits except for the trial and error approach. And using that method during a battle was not conducive to survival.

Now, however…

He concentrated on one of the enchantments.

Enchantment: [Doubtless].

Enchantment Description: [Provides the wearer with a small amount of protection against mind attacks.]

'Good to know.'

The amount was "small" because it was just an Awakened Memory. Since "enhanced durability" was self-explanatory, Sunny dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud and summoned the Silver Bell.

The small bell had only one spark of light, which was much less bright than the ones inside the Puppeteer's Shroud, at that. Studying the runes did not show anything interesting. It was a tier one dormant Memory with a single enchantment that increased the range at which its ringing could be heard to several kilometers.

Finally, it was time to take a look at the Midnight Shard. The graceful blade appeared in front of Sunny in all its austere beauty.

Memory: [Midnight Shard].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Description: [Forged from the shard of a fallen star, this stalwart blade is firm and unyielding. It favors those who are willing to fight to the last drop of blood and knows no surrender.]

Memory Enchantments: [Unbroken].

Enchantment Description: [This blade refuses to be broken, and thus is durable beyond reason. It will greatly enhance the power of its wielder when they are close to death, however only if the wielder is unwilling to surrender.]

Sunny sighed, simultaneously satisfied and disappointed. Now he knew how to access the well of power that hid in the deepest parts of his heart when the Midnight Shard was in his hand. However, it could only be done when he was at the death's door, wounded and minutes away from perishing. It could either save him from a dire situation or create an opportunity for a very heroic last stand.

Sunny did not care for heroics, so the second option did not seem appealing at all. The first one was much more useful, but only in the case of him screwing up terribly and getting himself in a lethal amount of trouble.

In other words, it could only be used if he failed. In normal battles, the special qualities of the Midnight Shard were of no use at all.

'A pity. But… an ace in your sleeve in case things really go south is not bad either.'

Done with his Memories, Sunny was ready to learn of the new Attribute he had received. Considering how much pain he had to go through to acquire the damn thing, he had pretty high expectations.

Looking for the cluster of runes representing his Attributes, Sunny focused his attention and carefully read their names.

There were five Attributes: [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows] and the new one, [Blood Weave].

Sunny was about to summon the description of the [Blood Weave], but then stopped.

Something was not right.

Something did not add up.

The feeling of unease from before had returned, now much stronger.

When did he first feel it?

For some reason, his thoughts were slow and murky. He felt a strong inclination to forget all about the strange feeling and concentrate on something else.

But this time, he did not.

'It was… when I was studying the Puppeteer's Shroud. And it was… connected… to the number five.'

Five? What meaning was there to the number five?

With his attention beginning to wane, Sunny bit his lip, causing drops of blood to roll down. A burst of pain cleared his mind for a moment.

There were five Attributes… [Fated], [Mark of Divinity], [Child of Shadows], and [Blood Weave].

'What?'

There were… five… five Attributes!

But he only counted four.

Bewildered, Sunny stared at the runes.

He was sure that there was a fifth Attribute. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't read its name and description. Every time his gaze fell on the runes corresponding to the fifth Attribute, he would find himself distracted, his memory wiped clean of any mention of it.

Just remembering that there were five Attributes was incredibly hard. Clenching his teeth, Sunny tried to keep his concentration, not allowing himself to be distracted.

He was not going to forget!

"Five! It's five! There's five of them, damn it!"

Immediately after he said those words out loud, something changed. It was as though an invisible veil had fallen from his eyes. Or, rather, from his mind.

Sunny froze, shock and fear permeating his heart. He was remembering…

'Didn't I… didn't I see a dream?'

Yes, of course… he saw Cassie standing over him with panic in her eyes. Begging him to remember the number five.

No, wait…

Was that a dream? At the time, he believed so.

But then, he forgot.

Just as he had forgotten what actually happened on that day.

On the day when Cassie woke him up to tell him something important…

Chapter-84: Black Seed

It happened on the day they killed the Carapace Demon. Back then, all three of them were utterly exhausted. After moving away from the corpse of the giant creature and finding a good hiding spot, they fell to the ground and immediately fell asleep.

But they didn't stay asleep for long.

An hour or two later, Sunny was shaken awake by Cassie, who was holding him by the shoulders. There was an expression of terror written clearly on her face.

"Sunny! Sunny! Wake up!"

Instantly coming back to his senses, he jumped to his feet and summoned the Midnight Shard, afraid that they were under attack.

However, there was no one around except for panicked Cassie and wary Nephis, who was in a similar pose, her sword raised and ready to strike.

Confused, Sunny looked at the blind girl.

"Cassie? What's the matter?"

Grabbing him by the shoulders again, she brought her face close and whispered in a begging tone:

"Sunny, you have to stop it! Please! You are the only one who can!"

He frowned, failing to understand what exactly he was supposed to stop.

'Did she see another vision?'

Trying to calm her, he said in a measured tone:

"It's alright, Cassie. Slow down, breathe. Tell us what happened. Start from the beginning…"

She desperately shook her head.

"There's no time! I will forget soon! We all will! But you, you have to remember!"

'We will all forget soon? What does she mean?'

Not able to see Sunny's dazed expression, Cassie yelled:

"You have to remember, Sunny! Five! It's five! Remember! You have to remember! It's five!"

Remember… five?

The blind girl was not making any sense. Sunny carefully put his arm around her, feeling how scared she was from her shaking body.

"Alright, Cas. I promise I'll remember. Five, right? See, it's pretty hard to forget."

Nephis was looking at them with a frown, not neglecting to scan the surroundings for any signs of danger from time to time. For some reason, Cassie was only talking to Sunny, not paying her any attention.

What was it that she thought Sunny could do, but Changing Star could not?

Hearing his answer, the blind girl calmed down a little. However, she was still terrified.

"Good. Good. Remember, it's five. You promised…"

Her voice sounded quieter and quieter, as though she was not sure of what she was saying. Sunny was barely able to discern her mumbling.

"…the more complex a thought, the harder it will be to hold on to it. That's why I can only tell you this one word, the simplest thing to impart… when the right time comes, it might change things…"

Carefully choosing his words, Sunny hesitantly asked:

"Cassie? Can you tell us what happened, exactly?"

Hearing his voice, the blind girl flinched and raised her head to face him.

There were still traces of fear in her eyes, but mostly, it had been replaced by confusion.

"Huh? Did something happen?"

Sunny blinked.

Wasn't she the one who woke them up in a panic?

'Wait… why did she wake us up, to begin with?'

For some reason, he had trouble remembering the details of the past few minutes. The conversation they just had was already hazy in his memory.

'I guess I'm still groggy from waking up so abruptly. Lack of sleep affects concentration…'

"You wanted to tell us something. It had to do with the… uh… number five?"

Cassie raised her eyebrows.

"Five? Why five?"

Sunny didn't know what to say. He was going to ask the same question.

"I have no clue."

Perplexed, he looked at Nephis, hoping that she will be able to clear the situation.

Changing Star was standing a few steps away with a distracted expression on her face. Sensing his gaze, she stared at him and asked:

"Why do you have your sword out?"

Sunny glanced at the Midnight Shard and tried to remember what had caused him to summon the Memory.

"Uh… I'm not sure. Why did you summon yours?"

Nephis looked down, as though noticing the sword in her hands for the first time. An expression of doubt appeared on her face.

'What's wrong with our heads today?'

Understanding that it was pointless to expect help from Nephis, Sunny sighed and turned back to Cassie:

"Did you see another vision?"

The blind girl trembled. Her eyes opened wide, once again filled with fear.

"A vision… yes, I saw a vision. An awful, awful vision…"

"What did you see?"

She was silent for a few moments, trying to remember. A deep frown appeared on her face. Finally, Cassie quietly said:

"I saw… a mountain… a mountain of corpses. Countless bodies piled on each other until they formed a bloodsoaked hill. And at the top of it, a tiny black seed was floating in a pool of blood… "

She grew silent, then continued:

"That was the past, I think. But then I saw the future… a future. It was us. Oh, gods! We were… we were…"

Her voice trembled. As though not daring to say something aloud, Cassie stopped.

Sunny waited for a while, then carefully asked:

"We were what?"

The blind girl turned to him in confusion.

"What?"

He scratched the back of his head. What were they just talking about?

"You were… uh… telling us about your vision. I think?"

Cassie frowned.

"...What vision?"

To his embarrassment, Sunny wasn't sure either. He just remembered something about the number five and… a seed?

For some reason, he felt as though that number was very important. But why? He had no idea.

"I forgot."

Suddenly, Nephis, who was standing nearby, lowered her hands and dismissed the sword that she had been holding for some reason. Looking at them with a bit of confusion, she hesitantly asked:

"Why are you guys awake? We need to rest. Something might get attracted by the demon's corpse, so we'd better return to peak condition as soon as possible."

Distracted and already forgetting about the conversation with Cassie, Sunny blinked a couple of times, shrugged, and decided to go back to sleep. None of this made sense anyway. They were probably struck dumb by exhaustion…

He felt so tired.

…A few hours later, when the shadow noticed the winged creature circling around the island, he awoke again. By that time, the memory of Cassie's warning was so fragmented and hazy that it seemed like a strange dream.

But the seed was already planted deep into his subconscious.

And now that it had blossomed, Sunny was finally able to fight through the haze of oblivion and remember everything.

Chapter-85: One Step at a Time

Sitting inside the Vile Thieving Bird's nest, Sunny frowned and clenched his fists.

Something unnatural was happening to them ever since they came to the Ashen Barrow. Now that he had remembered Cassie's warning, it was apparent that their minds were affected, making them forgetful and easily distracted.

Even now that he knew about it, thinking straight was strangely hard. It took all of his will just to keep the knowledge of the anomaly in his memory.

The events of these past few days were still hazy. Remembering something else, Sunny closed his eyes in frustration.

Had they really spent mere days on this island? The number of shadow fragments he received from eating Soul Tree fruits suggested otherwise. It was quite possible that as much as a whole month had passed since the first time they ate them.

And their minds were corroded a bit more with every day that passed. Pretty soon, there would be nothing left of them at all. Only empty shells, walking around wearing their faces.

Sunny's face paled.

With a growing feeling of dread, he realized that there were large gaps in his memory. He could not remember how they got to the Ashen Barrow, and where they were going. Other things, too, were unclear and blurry.

'Stay calm.'

Despite how compromised his memory was, there were still ways to understand what was going on, and then maybe undo it. After all, he was able to remember Cassie's warning. That meant that their memories were not gone, just obfuscated.

'First step: resist the impulse to forget everything again.'

Not succumbing to the constant pull on his mind was not an easy task, but he was able to manage, at least for now.

'Second step: try to understand the reason why you were able to remember these things.'

When Cassie begged him to remember the number five, she must have already known that he would receive a new Attribute. He had noticed the existence of the mysterious fifth Attribute as the result, which triggered the frightening revelation.

However, why was he able to not forget about the existence of the fifth Attribute altogether?

What made him so special? Cassie had even said that he was the only one who could do it. Why him and not Changing Star?

Sunny massaged his temples. Then, a sudden realization came to him.

'Doubtless!'

One of the enchantments of the Puppeteer's Shroud was providing him with a small amount of resistance against mind attacks. That's why he was slightly less susceptible to the frightening forgetfulness that infected them on the Ashen Barrow.

That was the reason why he had been the last one to agree to eat the "miraculous" fruits. Why he had often felt that things were wrong. He was also the only one who had managed to remember Cassie's warning, even if it took him a long time.

Cassie knew about the Puppeteer's Shroud, and that's why she had chosen him instead of Nephis.

'Smart girl.'

So… their warped state was the result of a mind attack. But who could attack them on this desolate island?

The answer was pretty obvious.

'That damned tree!'

Looking down, Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back.

The Soul Tree was, in fact, a colossal, ancient and utterly horrifying Nightmare Creature. If he was right, then its power had to be simply unimaginable. He was afraid

to even think about what its rank and class were.

'No wonder it was able to drain a whole area of the crimson labyrinth of all life.'

No wonder it was able to survive and thrive in this hellish place. Of all the horrors in this hell, it might have been the most terrifying.

Finally, Sunny knew the reason why no other Nightmare Creature dared to approach the Ashen Barrow. Even monsters were afraid of the Soul Tree.

…Except for equally harrowing things that dwelled beneath the waves of the deep, dark sea.

There was no way for them to destroy it. The Soul Tree was just too big, old and powerful. For a moment, Sunny entertained the idea of setting it on fire, but quickly abandoned it. He would need a volcanic eruption or some sort of divine intervention to burn that colossus down.

'So… what to do?'

After thinking for some time, Sunny decided not to be hasty and move forward one step at a time.

First, he had to know the exact situation with his Attributes.

Summoning the runes, he tried once again to read the description of the hidden fifth Attribute.

The result was the same. He knew it was there, but could not remember what it was no matter how much he tried.

'Figures.'

Confirming that it was still impossible for him to solve that mystery on his own, Sunny moved his attention to the Mark of Divinity. New runes appeared under its description:

[Mark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "You bear a faint scent of divinity, as though someone briefly touched by it once, a long time ago."

[Mark of Divinity] is ready to evolve. Proceed?

Not wasting time, Sunny said "yes".

Immediately, the name and the description of the Attribute changed. The new runes read:

Attribute: [Spark of Divinity].

[Spark of Divinity] Attribute Description: "Every fire starts from a spark. Somewhere deep within your soul, a radiant spark shines with divine light."

He didn't feel any changes within himself. It seemed as though the question of whether or not he wanted to proceed was just a formality, and the Attribute already evolved back when he had consumed the drop of ichor.

'My affiliation to divinity has increased. Neat. Although I'm not sure how it might be useful…'

Was that spark of divinity the reason why he was now able to see the inner workings of Memories, as well as some other stuff like the shadows in his Soul Sea? If so, was it a universal trait of all Awakened with high divine affiliation, or just his?

For some reason, Sunny felt that it was the latter option. He had received the drop of ichor from a being called Weaver, and then became able to see the strings that were weaved through the Memories, giving them their unique qualities. It wasn't hard to see the connection.

If this was true, did it mean that there were different kinds of divinity? And he inherited a small amount of a very special kind of divinity?

Was Weaver even a deity? Every god he had heard about was named in a similar fashion. There was Shadow God, War God… well, that's it. He had never heard the names of any other god.

However, Weaver's name was different.

Maybe Weaver was not a deity at all…

Maybe he, she or it was actually one of the Unknown.

Sunny shook his head, feeling that he had almost allowed himself to get distracted and release the hold on his memory. He could not allow himself to go on tangents now…

Concentrating, he looked at his new Attribute, [Blood Weave.]

[Blood Weave] Attribute Description: "You have inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage. Your blood has been altered and imbued with odd tenacity."

So… he would be less likely to bleed out in the future? That was a very nice enhancement.

However, it did not help Sunny with his current situation.

It was time for the next step…

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It was early morning when Sunny descended from the Soul Tree. However, he didn't bring any fruit with him.

Walking over to sleeping Cassie, he took her by the shoulders and gently shook her awake. The irony of how this situation mirrored the one where Cassie had told Sunny to remember the number five was not lost on him.

The blind girl slowly came to her senses and turned to face him with a sleepy, confused expression.

"Sunny? Why are you up so early?"

He hesitated, then said with a friendly smile, trying very hard to act as though everything was alright.

"Actually, I didn't sleep at all this night."

Cassie frowned. Luckily, she could not see the sorry state he was in, nor the dried blood on his face.

"Really? Why?"

He shrugged.

"I decided to climb the Soul Tree and search for some fruits. But that's not very important. Hey… your Aspect Ability allows you to see other people's Attributes, right?"

She nodded, still confused.

"Yes. You know this. Why?"

Sunny lingered, then said in a carefree tone:

"Can you take a look at mine?"

Chapter-86: Final Clue

Sunny's thought process was very simple. Honestly, in the state he was in, complex ideas that went against Soul Tree's indoctrination were almost impossible to hold on to. He was already at his limits just trying to remember what had happened in the giant nest.

On his way down, Sunny had to bite himself several times, leaving bloody marks on his hands. Sharp pain cleared his mind for a few moments and gave him temporary relief from the constant pull of forgetfulness.

Coincidentally, he was already noticing the effect [Blood Weave] was exerting on him. The bites only bled for a short while, quickly turning into scabs. The speed of coagulation of his blood was clearly enhanced. He also felt more energetic, his endurance substantially better than it had been before.

Which made sense. The human body was a system where every part affected the other. A comprehensive improvement of one of these parts, especially one as important as blood, had to lead to a chain reaction of lesser improvements throughout the system.

It seemed that he had severely underestimated the importance of his new Attribute.

'Focus, idiot! No tangents!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny concentrated on the task.

He wanted to use Cassie's Aspect Ability to learn the truth of the hidden Atrribute. Her sight was different from his. Sunny could only see the information provided by the runes because it was a default function of the Spell. He simply accessed that information with his mind.

Cassie's sight, however, came from her Aspect. Thus, even if their minds were compromised, it should not have affected her ability to see other people's Attributes. She also had a high affinity to revelations and fate.

So, there was a high chance that Cassie would be able to succeed where he had failed.

Finally reaching the ground, Sunny woke the blind girl up and, after a short conversation, mentioned the Attributes. Then, he carefully asked:

"Can you take a look at mine?"

Cassie was visibly confused by this question.

"Can't you do it yourself?"

Sunny smiled.

"I can, but I think you'll be surprised when you see them."

The blind girl hesitated, then shrugged.

"Alright. But if it turns out that you woke me up for nothing, I'll be pretty upset. That was not very nice of you…"

She turned to face him and froze for a moment, as though staring into his eyes.

"Fated, Child of Shadows, Spark of Divinity… wait, wasn't it "mark" of divinity? Huh, I must have remembered wrong."

Stopping for a second, Cassie shyly covered her mouth with her small hand and yawned.

"Uh. My memory has not been too good lately. Too much rest, I guess. Where was I? Oh, yes. Blood Weave… huh?

Where did this come from?"

Sunny forced a chuckle.

"This thing? From an egg. Anyway, is there something else?"

Cassie blinked a couple of times.

"An… egg? Well, if you say so…"

Usually, an appearance of a new Attribute was not something one would gloss over. But in the state she was in, Cassie's attention span was severely reduced, and her mental capacity was clouded. She just frowned for a second, then forgot all about the discrepancy.

Sunny's heart, meanwhile, was beating like it was going to explode. With a fake smile frozen on his face, he waited for the blind girl's next words. They were going to decide whether or not he would be able to get to the bottom of things.

And, therefore, find a way to rise from that bottom.

With an absentminded smile, Cassie said:

"My mom makes the best eggs… uh… what were we talking about? Right, your Attributes. The last one is Enthralled. Wait… where did this…"

Knowing that there was very little time, Sunny hurriedly asked:

"The description! What does the description say?"

A bit of tension sipped into his voice. Startled by this intensity, Cassie didn't ask the same question again and simply said:

"You've been mesmerized by the ancient fiend, Soul Devouring Tree, and are being turned into its thrall. Once the process is complete, there will be no escape."

As soon as Sunny heard these words, it was as though heavy chains fell from his mind. Suddenly, his memories returned in an avalanche, making him stagger. His eyes opened wide.

Only now that he had fully recovered his memory did Sunny realize the extent to which his mental state was warped, how much of his true self was gone, how close he came to being completely obliterated without even knowing that a terrible monster was slowly devouring his mind.

An extreme feeling of terror filled his heart. For a few moments, Sunny lost the ability to speak, covered in cold sweat and shaking.

'C—calm down. Calm down. It didn't happen, you stopped it. You're back, it didn't eat you.'

Slowly, he was able to get a grip on his feelings and achieve some semblance of composure. He came very close to the edge, but did not take the last step. He was still himself.

It wasn't over yet. They still had a chance.

Looking at Cassie, Sunny slowly exhaled and said.

"Thank you."

The blind girl smiled and raised her eyebrows.

"For what?"

She had already forgotten all about their conversation.

Sunny was free from being mesmerized by the Soul Devourer, but Cassie was not. Her memory, mind and thinking were still compromised. Turning worse as they spoke.

A pained smile appeared on Sunny's face. Struggling to keep his tone light and cheerful, he said:

"For helping me out just now. Sorry about waking you up so early… go back to sleep. I'll take it from here."

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then got distracted and forgot that he was there at all. Yawning, the blind girl lay down and covered herself with her cloak. Soon, she was asleep again, happy and blissfully ignorant of the fact that her days were numbered.

Sunny watched her for a while, a grim expression on his face. Finally, he turned and walked away, thinking:

'Over my dead body.'

Chapter-87: Plan of Escape

Nephis was still at the western edge of the island, gazing over the receding black waters. It seems as though she barely moved since the last time Sunny saw her.

Looking at her with clear eyes, free from the most debilitating effects of being Enthralled, he was able to notice things that he had not noticed before.

Neph's hair was indeed longer. Back at the Academy, it was short and usually parted to the side. Now silver strands were already long enough to cover her ears, hanging messily without their usual luster.

Changing Star's face seemed much thinner, with dark circles under her eyes and a bleak, dull expression. Her usual confidence and energy were gone, replaced by exhausted stillness.

She looked as though some unknown illness was consuming her from inside, slowly turning the once radiant girl into a pale shadow of her former self.

Sunny suspected that he knew what that illness was.

He had known for a long time that Nephis had a mysterious goal, and that her determination to achieve that goal was nothing short of frightening. That burning desire of hers, it seemed, was strong enough to resist even the enthrallment of the Soul Devourer.

However, while the feelings remained, the actual memories were gone. Thus, Nephis had been left longing desperately for something that she did not know, with no way to understand the nature of her emotions or satiate them. This inner conflict was the reason for her terrible state.

Coming closer, Sunny sat down and looked at Neph, wishing to see her striking grey eyes shine once again with unbreakable resolve.

"Hey, Neph."

She turned her head to him, not saying anything. Sunny gritted his teeth, feeling dark anger blossoming in his heart.

'That loathsome tree!'

"I have something to tell you."

Trying to stay calm and not miss anything, he told Nephis everything that he had found out. He told her about his trip to the upper parts of the Soul Tree, the giant nest he had discovered, the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn and how he had killed it, the strange Memory with no rank and type, the new Attribute he had received and the hidden one he had accidentally discovered.

Finally, Sunny told her about the nature of that Attribute, the true nature of the Soul Devourer, how long they had been on the island, and what they had forgotten.

When he finished, Changing Star's expression didn't change one bit. Looking away, she simply said:

"I see."

Sunny blinked.

"I see? I see?! That's all you have to say?!"

She glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"What do you want me to say?"

He gaped at her and clenched his fists.

"Wow! How horrible! Good job, Sunny! Say something, at least! Is it so hard to behave like a human?!"

She turned away, not answering. Sunny stared at her for several seconds, then said in a tired, defeated voice:

"I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, Neph. How do I get us out of this?"

She was silent for a while. Sunny almost assumed that Changing Star had already forgotten everything that he had told her, but then he noticed sparks of white radiance dancing in the depths of her eyes.

Nephis had activated her Aspect Ability, using pain to stay lucid for as long as possible.

Finally, she looked at the retreating dark sea and said:

"We need to build a boat."

Sunny blinked.

"What?"

Changing Star sighed and turned her face to look at him.

"We've been here, on this island, for many weeks. Our minds are slowly being erased by the Soul Tree, turning us into its slaves. Forever. However, the process is not complete."

He nodded, listening.

"What thoughts did the Soul Tree put in our heads? That it is benevolent and great. That its fruits are desirable. And that we shouldn't leave the island, staying as close to it as possible. The first two commands make perfect sense. The third, however, is not so simple."

Nephis gestured at the vast expanse of black water.

"From that third command, we can deduce that the effect of the Soul Tree's enthrallment weakens with range. And that if we put enough distance between ourselves and the tree, it will be broken."

Sunny's face brightened when he understood Neph's logic. So there was a way! They just had to leave the Ashen Barrow and flee, not looking back until the Soul Devourer's brand was gone from their souls. However…

"But why a boat? Why not just run away on foot?"

Changing Star lowered her head and said quietly:

"We'll never make it to the castle on foot. We'll just die. I was too arrogant before to think… well, it doesn't matter now. It will take many months to go around the crater through the labyrinth, especially now that we don't have the Echo. And every day we spend there is another day we risk encountering something that will kill us without even breaking a sweat."

She sighed.

"We were already lucky to survive for as long as we did. But in the end, no matter how much we fought and persevered, we still encountered the Soul Tree. This should have been our end. Do you know how improbable it is that we even got a chance to have this conversation?"

Sunny hesitantly shook his head.

"First, we had to have an oracle in our group to see the future. Then, Cassie had to formulate and execute an ingenious plan in the short amount of time her memory remained intact. That plan was based on the fact that there was someone with an awakened armor of fifth tier in our group, one enchanted with the extremely rare mind protection trait, no less…

Awakened with the revelation affinity were few and far between. Sleepers with a Memory equal to the Puppeteer's Shroud were even rarer.

"...That person then had to find and kill a Great Devil. More incredibly, he had to receive an actual Lineage Memory from it. Do I need to explain how implausible this combination of events is?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

Nephis closed her eyes.

"My point is… If we go into the labyrinth, we will inevitably meet the next Soul Tree, and even if we miraculously manage to survive that encounter, there will be the next, and then the next. Sooner or later, we will die."

She looked west, where the last remnants of the dark sea were disappearing beyond the horizon.

"But if we build a boat and use Cassie's staff to fill the sail with wind… maybe we'll be eaten by the dwellers of the depths, or maybe they won't pay us any attention at all. It's a gamble either way. Either we die, which is the same as returning to the labyrinth, or not. If we survive, we'll be able to travel a hundred, maybe even two hundred kilometers in one night.

More distance than we had covered so far."

Sunny froze, stunned by that number.

In all the weeks preceding their battle with the Carapace Demon, they had traveled for no more than a hundred, maybe one hundred and fifty kilometers from the giant knight's statue. It was a considerable amount, especially because of how hard each step through the crimson labyrinth had been.

To travel as much, perhaps even more in a single day… that would have been incredible. But…

Sail… on the dark sea?

Suddenly, he felt very cold and small.

Chapter-88: Boat Builders

Trying to gather his courage, Sunny looked into the distance and said in a raspy voice:

"You've seen the creatures that dwell under these waves. Do you really want to swim across them?"

Changing Star was silent for a few seconds, then sighed.

"We are damned either way, Sunny. What do we have to lose?"

She fell silent for a moment and grimaced, pale flames dancing in her eyes. Then, in a quiet voice, she added:

"We will not light any fires, relying on your eyes to guide us west. We will hope that Cassie's armor will protect us. Maybe it will be enough."

Sunny glanced at Neph and asked:

"What's so special about Cassie's armor?"

She hesitated for a moment, then answered without looking at him:

"It's a tier six awakened Memory. One of its traits is to make the wearer less likely to draw the enemy's attention."

While Sunny was digesting this information, Nephis suddenly trembled. Closing her eyes, she said through gritted teeth:

"I am at my limit. My mind is… fading. If you have any questions left… better… ask them fast."

He blinked, startled. Then, knowing that there was not much time left, Sunny asked the first thing that came to his mind:

"Do you even know how to build a boat?"

Changing Star simply nodded, letting him know that she did. Her expression was slowly turning lost and dull again.

Racing against time, Sunny frantically thought of another question.

"How do I convince you to leave the island once your memory is gone?"

Nephis looked at him, struggling to hold onto the last shreds of lucidity. For a moment, her eyes became clear again. White flames ignited in their depths, illuminating her pale, beautiful face.

"Aster... Song... Vale. Say those words to me, and I will listen."

Starting to lose the grip on her thoughts, she turned away and added after a short pause, her voice steady and even:

"If anything happens, take Cassie and flee. Don't… don't…"

Then, the light in her eyes slowly dimmed, and soon, Changing Star was staring west once again, all memory of their conversation gone from her mind.

Sunny sat by her side for some time, waiting. After a while, he shifted a little and said:

"Hey, Neph."

She turned to him, her face bleak and full of confusion.

"Sunny? Oh… when did you get here?"

"A while ago."

Then, he smiled and said in a carefree tone:

"Hey, can I ask you something? Do you know how to build a boat?"

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Nephis was very surprised by his question, but eventually agreed to help him. Sunny didn't tell her why exactly he wanted to build a boat, dodging the questions with practiced finesse. His Flaw was not making things easy, but with the state Neph was in, persuading her was not very hard.

Manipulating her felt a little strange, but explaining everything once again would have taken too much time. Not to mention that he wasn't sure that it would work again.

And there was not much time left. With every hour, their condition worsened.

Even Sunny was having trouble keeping his lucidity intact. Every time he felt that his mind was beginning to slip, he had to inflict pain on himself to get a few moments of reprieve. Even so, his thoughts were slow and fragile. Keeping them together was taking a heavy toll on him.

They had to flee the island as soon as possible. Sunny was determined to be ready by the time the dark sea returned.

Turning away from Nephis to not let her see the pained expression on his face, Sunny bit his hand once again. Feeling the bitter taste of blood on his tongue, he let the wave of pain clear his mind and blinked, amused at the irony of the situation.

He was gnawing on himself to prevent himself from being eaten. What a funny contradiction.

Hiding his bleeding hand behind his back, Sunny turned to Neph and asked:

"So, how are we going to make the boat?"

She thought about it for some time, then said indifferently:

"We will have to use the materials at hand. For the hull, we will have to use the dead demon's carapace. We can strip several armor plates of suitable shape and tie them together with the golden rope…"

Sunny raised his eyebrows:

"The… the Carapace Demon's armor? It's made out of some strange steel. Can steel even float?"

Nephis glanced at him with reproach.

"Anything can float, Sunny. You just have to make sure that you're displacing more water than the weight of the floating object. That's how boats work."

He blinked.

"Ah… okay. About the sail, I think we can ask Cassie to lend us her cloak. What do you think?"

Changing Star gave him a strange look.

"I mean… yes? I still don't understand what got you so excited about boat building, but I'm sure she'll be willing to help you out with this… uh… passion project."

Sunny smiled.

"Great! Let's go butcher the demon, then!"

A strange sentence to say with a smile, but not the strangest one he had to say to convince Neph to help him.

A few minutes later, they reached the giant carcass of the Carapace Demon. It was towering above them like a small hill of polished metal. After that first day when the strange winged abominations had circled around the island for several hours, never daring to approach, nothing else had shown up to lay claim to the fearsome creature's meat.

As the result, the carcass was largely intact.

Strangely, the demon's corpse had not begun to rot. Only the metal of its carapace slowly deteriorated, losing its luster and shine, then turning less and less durable. By now, its surface was marred by large patches of rust.

Nephis climbed up on top of the carcass and walked from side to side, looking under her feet. Then, she gestured at several spots:

"These curved plates will be perfect if we can fit them together tight enough. Each one is long enough to form the entirety of the hull, leaving enough space for the three of us to sit side by side."

Sunny had no knowledge of shipbuilding, so he decided to trust her judgment. Looking up from the ground, he asked:

"What about the mast?"

Changing Star scowled.

"That… I will have to think about."

Sunny smiled.

"Alright. While you're thinking, I'll go fetch Cassie to keep you company…"

Chapter-89: Demon's Bones

Sunny had a lot to do before the sunset.

The parts of the plan spun in his head, making it ache. He had to constantly remain focused, straining his will to its limits, just to keep himself from forgetting everything. When it was not enough, he had to use pain to augment his concentration.

His hands and arms were covered in ghastly bite marks. Without the Blood Weave, Sunny might have fainted from blood loss already. Still, with his pale face turning even whiter from exhaustion and feverish light burning in his eyes, he must have looked like a zombie.

Luckily, Cassie couldn't see any of it.

It didn't take much to convince her to join their strange endeavor. The blind girl's state was way worse than his or Neph's. She seemed to be barely holding on, her thoughts slow and meek. Sunny's heart was gripped with worry.

'Why is she affected so much more than us? Is it because we have True Names, but she does not?'

Names were anchors of one's sense of self, after all. Could it be that True Names served a similar role, only in matters having to do with the Spell?

He didn't know.

Sunny guided Cassie to the carcass of the Carapace Demon. Nephis was already busy stripping plates of armor from its back. Her silver sword was seemingly able to cut through the deteriorated metal, making the task not as hard as he had been afraid of.

Gently sitting the blind girl down in a spot where Neph could see her, he climbed atop the dead demon and evaluated the progress of Changing Star's work.

She looked at him with a frown:

"Aren't you going to help? This was your idea, after all."

Sunny shrugged.

"Maybe later. You seem to be enjoying yourself, anyway. Some people might say that it's a fun little project to chase the boredom away, right?"

She blinked a couple of times, then said:

"I guess."

Sunny nodded a couple of times, looking down at the spots where, stripped of armor plates, the demon's flesh was laid bare. The azure blood had coagulated, turning it dark and as hard as stone. Here and there, though, white layers of fat remained in pristine condition.

"Actually, I have another project in mind."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Oh really?"

Sunny summoned his sword and stepped closer to the gap in the creature's armor.

"Yeah. I want to make a candle."

Saying those words, he began to cut, separating the fat from the hardened muscle tissue.

Neph blinked a few times and then looked at Cassie:

"Hey, Cas. Has Sunny lost his mind?"

The blind girl perked up at the sound of her name.

"Huh? Uh… I'm not sure. I think he's just bored."

Sunny concentrated on his task, not paying them any attention. For a moment, he entertained the idea of cutting himself with the Midnight Shard's razor-sharp blade, but then dismissed it. Cutting through the Puppeteer's Shroud would have been really hard, and he couldn't dismiss the armor in front of the girls.

Well… to be more precise, he didn't want to.

With a sizable chunk of the demon's fat in his hands, Sunny jumped down from the carcass and landed on a pile of fallen leaves.

Making a candle out of animal fat was not very hard. He just needed fire, water, and time. The wick could be made out of seaweed fibers. It was not going to be pretty, but he didn't care about aesthetics.

Leaving Nephis and Cassie behind, Sunny rushed back to their camp.

The sun was already high in the sky.

He spent the rest of the day doing two things: watching over the process of making the candle and running around the island, gathering as much fallen leaves as he could.

From time to time, he would catch a glimpse of Nephis working on the boat, sometimes instructing Cassie to help her with menial tasks. From what he could see, the boat was coming along nicely. Changing Star knew what she was doing.

Of course, this was only possible because he had convinced her that this was just something he wanted to do for fun. In the girls knew that Sunny was planning to use the boat to escape the Ashen Barrow, the effects of enthrallment would have kept erasing their memories of the task, making finishing it impossible.

As it stood, Sunny was the only one who knew the true purpose of the boat. That's why he was forced to bear the full weight of Soul Tree's mind corruption alone.

He felt as though he was about to drop dead of exhaustion. His head felt like it was filled with molten iron. His vision was starting to become blurry.

But, stubbornly, Sunny refused to give up. No matter how tired he was, how much he wanted to let go and ease this suffering, returning to the bliss of not knowing, he kept his thoughts on one goal, and one goal only.

Escaping the clutches of the Soul Devourer.

Finally, with the evening approaching, the boat was ready.

Looking like a walking corpse, Sunny slowly approached the demon's carcass, which was now cut open and sliced apart. It was as though a mad vivisector had visited the island to perform an autopsy on the giant and forgot to sew the poor creature back up.

Nephis looked at him with concern.

"Sunny… are you alright?"

Giving her a crooked smile, he shrugged.

"I'm fine. Comparatively."

He did not specify what exactly he was comparing his current condition to.

Turning his head, Sunny looked at the boat with dark satisfaction.

It was… not how he had imagined it.

The hull was made out of curved plates of polished metal, with sharp spikes protruding from them in all directions. The plates were held together by the golden rope that was tied tightly around them. Changing Star had managed to make the gaps between the different parts of the hull so thin that no water could sip through.

The mast was made out of the demon's spine and ribs, with Cassie's enchanted cloak hanged on them to serve as the sail. There was even a steering oar, fashioned out of the tip of the giant's scythe.

He had expected to see a makeshift raft, but what met him was an actual vessel. Yes, it looked crude… but also strong, eerily macabre, and strangely impressive.

'Sailing upon the cursed sea on a boat made of demon bones… sound like the beginning of a legend,' he thought, temporarily mesmerized by the ghastly visage of the carapace vessel.

Nephis looked at him with a hint of satisfaction.

"Happy? Now what?"

Sunny gathered his thoughts.

'Now…'

As soon as he tried to think of what they had to do next, an invisible barrier appeared in his mind, blocking any attempt to continue that thought.

'Now we… we…'

No matter how hard he tried, Sunny couldn't quite remember what he wanted to do.

With a scowl, he raised his hand and bit down on his mangled palm, feeling drops of blood flowing into his mouth.

But even that pain did not help him destroy the barrier.

Sunny smiled darkly and kneeled, placing his hand on the ground. Summoning the Midnight Shard, he raised his other hand and brought the pommel of the sword down without any hesitation.

As the brittle bones of his ring finger shattered from the powerful strike, a wave of agony washed over his mind, obliterating the adamantine barrier.

'Now we get the hell out of here!'

Chapter-90: Nightfall

Nephis stared at Sunny, shocked by his sudden act of self-mutilation. Hissing through gritted teeth, he dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly rose back to his feet.

"Ah! Crap! That really hurts!"

His poor finger was red and swollen, pulsating with sharp pain. It was unmistakably broken. Sunny was so full of self-pity that he wanted to cry.

'Why am I so unlucky? First that nightmare in the nest, now this. How come no one else is suffering, just me…'

He conveniently decided to forget that Changing Star had been literally torturing herself for weeks and that due to her blindness Cassie was always covered in bruises.

Hearing his pained voice, the blind girl turned her head and asked:

"...Sunny? What happened?"

He grimaced and tried to smile.

"Ah, it's… nothing serious, really. I just, sort of… smashed my hand a bit."

Nephis opened her mouth to say something, but he hurriedly interrupted whatever she wanted to say.

"Anyway, Neph. Can you help me drag this gruesome masterpiece of yours to the edge of the island?"

At this point, one wrong question could make things very complicated. He didn't want to reveal the true purpose of his actions until the last moment. That way, he would have more leeway in how to deal with problems… should any arise.

Changing Star hesitated. A few seconds later, she shrugged, looking at him with a concerned frown.

"Are you sure you're okay, Sunny?"

He forced a smile.

"I will be if you help me."

Giving up, she shook her head and walked over to the front of the boat. Sunny turned to Cassie.

"We're off, Cas. Wait here for a bit, alright? I'll come get you soon."

She lingered, as though not quite understanding his words, then answered with an uncertain expression.

"Uh… okay."

Sunny raised his healthy hand to grip her shoulder, then hesitated and turned away with a dark look in his eyes. Enduring the pain, he walked toward the boat.

'Hold on a little more, Cassie. It will be over soon, I promise…'

The night was already approaching.

Sunny and Nephis dragged the boat across the island, pulling it as oxen yoked to a wagon. The ashen sand was not the most difficult of terrains, but the spikes on the strange vessel's hull were making the task harder. Thankfully, the boat was lighter than it looked.

Sunny knew that the alloy of the demon's carapace was extremely light from his experience with the Midnight Shard, which was forged from the same lustrous metal. If he were to believe the sword's description, this miraculous alloy came from a shard of a fallen star.

Whether this omen was good or bad, he didn't know.

Soon, they heard a thundering rumble in the distance. It came from the direction of the colossal crater.

The dark sea was awakening.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny grabbed onto the golden rope that was coiled around his chest and pulled harder.

'Come on! Faster!'

The sun was just about to touch the horizon when they finally reached the edge of the island. Falling to his knees, Sunny released the rope and gasped for air, his chest rising and falling frantically. A wave of overwhelming exhaustion was drowning his senses, making it hard to stay awake.

'Not yet… you can't let go yet…'

Nephis was silent, looking at him with a frown. For once, Sunny felt glad that she was weirdly taciturn by nature.

Gathering his strength, he stood up and glanced at the darkening sky. Time was running out.

Turning to Neph, he strained his parched throat and said in a raspy voice:

"I'll explain everything once Cassie is here. Don't go anywhere until I bring her, alright? Please."

Changing Star stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged with indifference and didn't say anything.

'I'll take it as a yes.'

What else could he do?

Cursing under his breath, Sunny turned around and hurried away. He had one last task to accomplish before returning for Cassie.

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Some time later, he came back to the spot where he had left Cassie. The blind girl was still there, sitting some distance away from the Carapace Demon's carcass and idly staring into the ground.

Hearing the sound of his approaching footsteps, she smiled weakly.

"Sunny?"

He walked over, tired to the bone, and said while trying to keep his tone casual:

"Yeah. It's me."

Cassie got distracted for a moment, then asked:

"Do you have a fruit? I'm hungry."

He flinched, then shook his head.

"No. Listen, we need to…"

"...I'm hungry. Do you have a fruit?"

Sunny stopped, looking at the blind girl with a forlorn expression. She sounded like a broken doll, repeating the same phrase over and over. Her condition wasn't good.

He licked his lips.

"Come with me, and your hunger will disappear."

This was the best misdirection he could come up with within the confines of his Flaw. However, this time, he failed to achieve the desired effect.

Cassie smiled and said:

"Really? You'll take me to the fruits?"

Due to his exhaustion and the debilitating effect of the enthrallment, Sunny got distracted for a moment and failed to control the Flaw. Without realizing it, he opened his mouth and said:

"No."

Cassie pouted and lowered her head:

"That's not nice, Sunny. Why did you lie to me?"

Still reeling from his mistake, Sunny missed the moment and made things even worse, turning a small oversight into a real problem:

"...Because I want to take you away from this cursed island."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Sunny froze and opened his eyes wide, refusing to believe that he had just messed up that bad.

However, the damage was already done.

Cassie turned to him with a deep scowl.

"Take me… away? But I don't want to leave. Why would I leave the Soul Tree?"

Sunny silently cursed and shouted, abandoning any attempt to control himself:

"Because that thing is evil! It's pure goddamn nightmare! Come on, let's go…"

Grabbing her hand, he tried to pull the delicate girl away, but she resisted with surprising strength.

"Let go of me, you jerk!"

Cassie managed to rip her hand away from his grip and flinched back, looking at Sunny with anger.

"I said I don't want to go! You're acting strange, Sunny! Stop, please!"

Sunny froze, not knowing what to do.

"I just…"

"This island is our home! It's so nice here, with the three of us together! Why do you want to leave?!"

He lingered, struggling to do what he knew had to be done. Finally, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"Because it's five! Remember?!"

'I'm sorry, Cassie…'

Then, he lunged forward and violently grabbed the blind girl, easily suppressing her resistance.

"What are you doing?! Stop! Help! Help! Neph!"

Throwing her over his shoulder, Sunny turned around and ran toward the edge of the island. Cassie resisted desperately, using her small fists to pummel his back with a rain of punches.

Despite the fact that she had never taken part in battles against the Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore, she still was considerably stronger than a normal person. All

those soul shards Changing Star had shared with her gave Cassie enough strength to make Sunny feel every strike.

It wasn't enough to seriously injure him, but more than enough to hurt like hell.

'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Cassie...'

Deeply disturbed, Sunny tried to block out Cassie's desperate screams and rushed to the boat. His forehead was covered in cold sweat.

As the last glimmers of light were disappearing from the sky, he finally returned to the edge of the island. The ghastly boat was silently standing on the sand, just a few meters away from the restless black water. Changing Star was resting just in front of it, raising her head to look at the source of the commotion.

"Neph! Help! Sunny has gone crazy!"

Nephis slowly rose to her feet, her indifferent expression radiating coldness. She slightly outstretched one hand.

'Crap.'

"Wait! It's not…"

Before he could finish the sentence, the silver sword appeared out of thin air, aimed at the ground… for now.

"Explain yourself."

Changing Star's voice was even and calm, but Sunny could feel the hidden threat in it. Suddenly, he saw her in a new light… or, rather, in an old one.

As a potential enemy.

The idea of facing off against Nephis sent chills running down his spine. He had almost forgotten the feeling he got back in the Academy, watching her wipe the floor with most of the Sleepers in their batch.

He had forgotten that she, too, was a monster.

Chapter-91: Escape

Licking his lips, Sunny cautiously said:

"It's not… not as you think, Neph. We've been caught in a trap by the Soul Tree. It's not benevolent… it's not protecting us. In fact, it's doing the opposite. If we don't leave this island, we'll become its slaves, forever. Or until it finds someone stronger and devours us!"

She tilted her head and looked at him with an unreadable expression.

"Come on, Nephis! Remember! We've talked about this already! This whole thing was your idea to begin with!"

For a moment, he thought that his words had awoken the stolen memories in her mind. But her response shattered those hopes into pieces.

"Leave… the great tree? You have really lost your mind."

'Curses!'

Changing Star raised her sword and said in a tone that made Sunny tremble.

"Let Cassie go. Now."

He hesitated, thinking about the best course of action. Then, he carefully placed the blind girl on the ground.

"Alright. I did. See? Now, listen to me. I have something very important to tell you…"

Before he was done speaking, Nephis disappeared from his view. Realizing that he was about to be attacked, Sunny prepared to defend himself…

However, a moment later, he was already lying on the ground, the tip of the silver sword pressed against his throat. Changing Star was standing above him, pale lights burning in her eyes.

'Well that was… embarrassing.'

All his training, all the experience he had won in countless bloody battles, all the power he had gained… Sunny had really thought that he stood a decent chance of standing his ground in a fight against Nephis, maybe even reaching a tie. But in the end, he had only lasted a second.

One would be tempted to call this shameful display a premature capitulation.

'Nice one, idiot! Now stop fooling around and focus!'

Feeling the cold steel touching his skin, Sunny tried to move as little as possible. He was pretty sure that Changing Star wouldn't just kill him in cold blood, but it was still better to not give her any reasons to do something drastic.

After all, Neph's mind was not all there.

Looking up at her cold, indifferent face, Sunny strained his vocal cords and shouted in exasperation:

"Aster, Song, Vale!"

Nephis's hand trembled, making a drop of blood roll down his neck. Her eyes opened wide, full of surprise and shock. Then, a dark expression appeared on her face.

Pressing slightly on the sword, she took a step forward and pierced him with a burning gaze. When she spoke, her voice was trembling with suppressed emotions:

"How... how do you know these names? Who are you?"

Sunny blinked, equally as surprised by her reaction. He had thought that these weird words were just a part of some code to jog her memory awake. But, as it turned out, they were not…

'Aster, Song, Vale… what the hell does it mean? What can make Nephis lose her cool? It has to be something important…'

Trying to stay as still as possible, he cautiously glanced at the blade of the sword and honestly answered:

"I didn't even know that these were names. It's just what you told me to tell you in case you forget what had to be done. You said if I tell you this, you'll listen to me."

Nephis stared at him, a shadow of doubt appearing on her face for a split second. It was gone almost instantly, replaced by grim determination. Gritting her teeth, she snarled:

"Which Domain do you belong to?!"

Sunny had no clue what she wanted him to say. So, he just asked:

"What's a domain?"

She grinned, a maniacal glimmer appearing in her eyes. This was very unlike calm, composed Nephis. If Sunny didn't know better, he would think that a completely different person was standing in front of him.

A person that was much more unpredictable and dangerous.

Meanwhile, Neph said:

"Don't pretend to… to…"

Suddenly, she stumbled, then frowned. It seemed as though Sunny's question touched something in Changing Star's mind, causing a chain reaction. A few seconds passed, each turning her frown deeper.

Slowly, the familiar poised calmness returned to her eyes. It didn't seem as though she had remembered everything, but, just as Nephis had promised, it seemed enough to make her listen to what Sunny had to say.

He understood it from the fact that she had finally removed the tip of the sword from his throat. She even helped him stand up.

Looking at Sunny with a strange expression, she then said:

"I really told you those words?"

Rubbing his slightly cut neck, he simply nodded. Blood Weave was already busy repairing the damage to his skin.

Nephis looked down, then closed her eyes for a few moments. When she opened them again, they were full of resolve.

"What do I need to do?"

Sunny really wanted to ask her about the meaning of the three mysterious names, but decided against it. They had to hurry.

"Ask Cassie to summon her staff. Then get her into the boat."

Dismissing her sword, Changing Star glanced at him for the last time and walked toward her friend.

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Somehow, Nephis had managed to talk Cassie into following her and boarding the ghastly vessel. She probably had to lie about a lot of things, but Sunny didn't want to ask, afraid that his Flaw would ruin everything.

Once the girls were inside the boat, he wrapped his tired body into the shadow and put his hands on the metal hull. Every part of his body seemed to hurt in its own unique way.

His mind was utterly exhausted.

'Come on, Sunny. One last push.'

With a crooked smile, he strained his muscles and pushed the boat toward black water.

As the last light of dusk disappeared, submerging the world into absolute darkness, the boat built from the bones of a demon slipped from the ashen sand into the cold embrace of the dark sea.

Following Sunny's instructions, Cassie aimed her staff and activated its enchantment, causing a strong gale to fill their modest sail.

At first, the boat moved slowly, the mast creaking under pressure. But Changing Star's craftsmanship was meticulous and reliable. The demon's spine held, and little by little, the small vessel began to gain speed.

Sunny sat at the stern, controlling the steering oar. In front of them, an endless expanse of black water stretched to the horizon, hiding indescribable horrors in its depths.

Behind them, the terrifying Soul Devouring Tree was slowly growing smaller.

Sunny stared at it, feeling a deep sense of regret grip his heart. He wished that he was powerful enough to destroy it. Leaving just like that, without exacting revenge on the ancient monster, filled him with anger.

Well… at least he left it a present.

Back at the Ashen Barrow, a candle was burning in a small alcove of stones that protected its flame from wind. Near the candle, a tall pile of dry, fallen leaves was towering over the alcove.

It had taken Sunny a long time to gather that pile. He had scoured most of the island, hoping to make it as tall as possible. He had also mixed dry seaweed and the remaining fat of the Carapace Demon into the leaves.

Some time later, the small candle was nearing the end of its life. Most of the wax had already melted, turning it even smaller. Just as the flame was about to go out, it ignited the leaves. After a few seconds, a massive, searing bonfire ignited in the middle of the island, illuminating the scarlet leaves of the evil tree. Almost instantly, the black waters surrounding the island surged with movement.

Sunny was already too far away to see any of it.

He didn't know if the creatures of the dark sea would be able to obliterate the Soul Devourer. He strongly doubted that the ancient fiend was that easy to destroy. However, with the Carapace Demon dead and the three humans meant to replace him gone, there was no one on the island to protect the gluttonous tree. Perhaps it would be seriously harmed, at least.

For now, it was the best he could do.

Looking back in the direction of the Ashen Barrow, Sunny gritted his teeth and thought:

'One day, I will become powerful enough to destroy that tree, these monsters, and anyone else who would dare to stand in my way. One day, I will become powerful enough to never be afraid again, of anyone or anything. Instead, all of them will fear me!'

He didn't notice that, just as he was thinking these words, Cassie suddenly raised her head and turned in his direction.

On her face, a dark expression appeared, soon erased by uncertainty and doubt.

Chapter-92: Journey into the Night

In the absolute darkness, a small vessel was gliding on the black surface of a restless sea. Its mast, made of a demon's spine, was straining under the assault of the winds. In the eerie silence of this vast and lightless void, the swift boat cut through the waves like a blade.

No sounds could be heard except for the creaking of bones and the crashing of water against its polished metal hull.

Sunny sat at the oar, steering the carapace vessel. He was guiding them west. With no moon or stars to show them the path, it was hard to keep the boat on course. But there was a mark left in his mind by the cold and menacing shadow of the Crimson Spire — using it as a compass, he was able to navigate the treacherous waters without losing his way.

Black skies above, dark sea beneath. With nothing but a thin layer of steel separating them from the tenebrous abyss, they sailed through the night.

Below them, countless horrors were hiding in the cursed depths. Several times, Sunny felt gargantuan shadows moving close to the small boat, attracted by the sound of its passing. Powerless to do anything, he had no choice but to tremble in silence, praying that the terrible creatures would turn away.

So far, luck was on their side. Perhaps they were too small and feeble to satiate the hunger of these ancient leviathans...

A few hours after the start of the voyage, Sunny felt that the constant pull on his mind had begun to wane. His thoughts were slowly becoming clearer, the haze of forgetfulness weakening with each minute. Soon, a ghostly sound of shattering glass resounded in his head. Instantly, the last remnants of the fog that was clouding his consciousness disappeared.

He was free from the enthrallment of the Soul Devourer.

Relieved, Sunny couldn't help but smile. However, his smile was weak and hesitant.

With the effects of the mind hex gone, his usual sharpness had returned. It felt as though an invisible weight had been lifted, allowing his thoughts to finally flow unobstructed once again. Everything became clearer, as though the whole world suddenly came into focus.

It was a wonderful feeling. But with it came a better understanding of how terrifying and precarious their current situation was.

They were quite literally balancing on the edge of a hungry abyss, their lives relying on nothing but capricious fortune. The decision to venture into the dark expanse of the cursed sea on a makeshift boat was pure insanity.

But then again, there was nothing sane about the Forgotten Shore to begin with. In this desolate hell, the craziest choice was sometimes the best one you had.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny held the oar and stared into the darkness.

A few minutes later, Cassie suddenly shifted, making the boat gently sway. She handed the magical staff to Nephis and cautiously moved closer to Sunny, feeling her way through the darkness with her hands.

Before Sunny could guess what was it that she wanted from him, he was suddenly caught in a tight embrace. The blind girl hid her face in his chest, hot tears streaming down her face.

Sunny froze, stunned and having no idea what to do. He could feel Cassie's body pressed against him and shaking from crying, her hands tightly wrapped around his neck. While he was trying to comprehend the situation, she quietly whispered:

"Thank you… thank you…"

Feeling extremely awkward, Sunny pretended to clear his throat.

"Uh… no need to thank me. If it wasn't for your warning, we would still be stuck on that island. So, we're even."

Then, he raised his hand and awkwardly patted her on the back.

Both of them were careful to keep their voices as quiet as possible, afraid that they will attract something from the black depths.

Cassie silently cried for several minutes, then finally let go of him. Wiping her face, she pulled her body away and whispered:

"I'm sorry."

Her voice sounded a bit strange. Confused, Sunny raised his eyebrows.

'What is she apologizing for?'

"Uh, I'm sorry too. For, you know, grabbing you back then."

She smiled and, wiping the last tear from her face, turned away to move back to the middle of the boat.

Sunny was left alone once again.

With nothing to do except for holding the steering oar, he let his thoughts wander. With his mind clear again, many things were worth revisiting. He had to distract himself from the eerie pressure of the endless dark emptiness somehow, anyway.

Despite the fact that their experience with the Soul Devourer was nothing short of harrowing, Sunny had somehow managed to end up considerably better off on the other end of it.

His haul this time was truly unbelievable. He had received an amazing new weapon, no less than a hundred shadow fragments, and two new Attributes.

Spark of Divinity was a real improvement over its previous version. The ability to perceive the inner structure of Memories alone opened a whole new horizon of possibilities. However, he was more interested in the mysterious Blood Weave. Somehow, Sunny felt that he had severely underestimated the uniqueness and importance of that Attribute.

Its origins, too, were covered in a veil of secrets. Who was that Weaver whose ichor he had consumed? Who were the Unknown that even the Spell was reluctant to mention? What was their connection to the gods? Why were the type and rank of the initial Memory he had received from the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn left empty?

How was it even possible for a Memory to give an Awakened new Attributes?

That last question guided him to think of something else.

Glancing up, he stared at Nephis and tried to recollect their conversation.

Looking back, she had revealed a lot of things that he had failed to notice in the moment.

First of all, Sunny now knew that Cassie's enchanted armor, which had been given to her by Changing Star, was an awakened Memory of the sixth tier. That meant that it came from an Awakened Terror, a Nightmare Creature one class above Mountain King that he himself had killed in his First Nightmare.

The secret of how Changing Star had managed to earn her True Name was now one step closer to being revealed.

Chapter-93: Black Water

Apparently, as far as accomplishing the impossible went, Nephis had outdone even Sunny. An Aspirant triumphing over an awakened tyrant was already unbelievable enough. But killing an Awakened Terror gave the word "unbelievable" a whole new meaning.

'No wonder her Aspect Ability is so versatile.'

Now, he was almost sure that Changing Star's Aspect was of the Divine Rank, just like his. That would explain why she was able to both heal and destroy with her strange and formidable powers, a combination as rare as his own Shadow Control.

'What's the probability of two Sleepers with Divine Aspects ending up so close to each other in the Dream Realm?'

Close to zero. It seemed like the unpredictable [Fated] Attribute had twisted the strings of fate once again.

Sunny felt shivers running down his spine.

His innate Attribute was capable of bringing both terrible curses and incredible blessings. At first glance, their meeting with Nephis seemed like the latter. But, if it was truly the result of [Fated] manipulating destiny, it could turn out to be the worst of calamities in the end.

After all, one of the possible meanings of her True Name was Star of Ruin.

The fear he had felt in that short moment before crossing swords with Nephis was still fresh in Sunny's mind.

And there were other things that she had revealed, too…

She apparently knew something about the [Drop of Ichor], being that she had called it a "Lineage Memory" without batting an eye. That suggested that Nephis knew much more

about the Spell than Sunny and the rest of the public did. It seemed as though there were secrets in the upper echelons of Awakened that they didn't want anyone else to know.

The three mysterious names she had told him might have been another of these secrets. And that last word she used, asking which "domain" he belonged to. What were these domains?

So many questions…

Sunny spent many hours pondering them, as well as going over all the information about the Forgotten Shore he had gathered.

The carapace boat flew over the dark water, drawing closer and closer to the western horizon.

Soon, he felt that the night was already drawing its last breaths. The light of hope ignited in Sunny's heart.

However, this was when their luck had finally run out.

***

The disaster came unexpected, violently throwing them into a void of confusion. This time, Sunny had not felt anything approaching the boat. The danger simply appeared out of nowhere, leaving him no time to react.

One second, the black waters were calm and clear. The next, they were boiling with movement, grotesque tentacles rising from them and wrapping themselves around the hull of the boat.

Sunny tried to jump to his feet, but at that moment, the whole vessel was violently jerked to the side. Falling, he heard the moans of metal being bent and torn apart. Then, salty water filled his mouth.

Rising, he caught a glimpse of Nephis standing at the bow of the boat, her silver sword lashing out at the approaching tentacle. However, blinded by darkness, she failed to notice a different threat. Another tentacle twisted and coiled around her body…

Then, without even a scream, she was gone, dragged into the dark depths, with no hope to return. All that remained was a long blade stuck helplessly in the bulbous flesh of the massive tentacle.

Sunny's eyes widened in disbelief.

'No, no, no... this can't be happening...'

The hull of the carapace vessel was then crushed and torn into pieces, throwing him into the cold, black water.

For a moment, Sunny was stunned by the coldness. Then, wrapping the shadow around his body, he swam up, trying to reach the surface. Soon, he succeeded and spun, trying to see something… anything… to give him hope.

But there was nothing around, only undulating waves and twisting tentacles.

Except for…

Far in the distance, Sunny noticed an unclear shape rising above the water. He strained his eyes, trying to discern its nature. Then, his heart skipped a beat.

A few hundred meters away, a giant stone hand towered above the surface of the sea, its palm opened as though trying to embrace the sky. It was slender and delicate, carved by the unknown sculptor with almost inhuman skill. If Sunny didn't know better, he would have thought that the hand belonged to a living, breathing being.

But all of this didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that he had a chance to survive.

Straining every muscle in his body, Sunny dodged a twisting tentacle and swam toward the hand, moving as fast as he could.

But then, he suddenly stopped. And looked back.

Misshapen pieces of metal and bone — all that remained of their boat — were floating on the surface of the dark sea. He had seen Neph being pulled under the water by the tentacles of the unknown creature, but Cassie, clad in her enchanted attention-repelling tunic, had a chance to escape.

He couldn't just leave without at least trying to find her.

'...Or can I?'

A dark thought appeared in Sunny's mind. After all, his own survival was the only thing that really mattered. Everything else was just a distraction...

'Why don't you think about yourself for a second? Are you really going to risk your precious life on the off chance that this helpless girl is still alive?'

He hesitated.

'Admit it, she is nothing but a burden. You always knew that one day she was going to drag you down…'

Yes, he did. But…

'But what? You're going to die, fool! Turn around and flee, now!'

Why was he even hesitating? This was his chance to escape! His only chance, perhaps! He had to survive!

Feeling an almost unbearable feeling of regret filling his chest, Sunny slowly inhaled.

Then, he gritted his teeth and dove down, heading back to the spot where their boat had been destroyed.

'What are you doing?! Have you lost your mind?!'

He couldn't see in the black water, but his Shadow Sense was still somewhat effective. He had a chance to feel Cassie's presence, at least if she wasn't already dead and dragged to the bottom of this cursed abyss.

'You fool! How is she worth it?! Why are you doing this?!'

Grimacing, he forced his annoying inner voice to shut up. In his mind, the answer was clear:

'Because I want to!'

Chapter-94: Battle in the Depths

Because he wanted to.

For once, Sunny's heart wasn't full of fear and despair. Instead, it was filled with defiant indignation. He was tired of bending under the pressure of the world, furtively clutching to the tiniest glimmers of hope, always afraid, always willing to do anything, abandon anything, just to survive for another day. It wasn't enough anymore.

He wanted to make the world bend to his wishes instead.

He wanted to live like a human being instead of an animal.

In these past months, Sunny had changed without even noticing. Somehow, he had grown unsatisfied with his previous way of life, one where his sole goal of survival at all cost overshadowed everything else. Whether he lives or dies had always been the only thing that mattered. But now, how he lived mattered more.

What was the point of having no master if he lived like a slave?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dove into the dark abyss.

The cold water embraced him like a burial shroud. He couldn't see in this cursed blackness, relying only on his shadow sense for guidance. Salt sipped into the bite marks on his hands and the cut on his neck, making them burn. Not paying the agony any attention, Sunny used his considerable strength to propel himself deeper and deeper into the darkness.

He could feel the giant tentacles moving in the water around him, pulling the pieces of the carapace boat into the gargantuan maw that was hiding somewhere far below. Once or twice, he had to desperately twist his body to avoid being touched by one of them.

But still, no sign of Cassie. His lungs were starting to burn.

Sunny dove deeper.

At this depth, the water pressure was starting to affect his movements, making each stroke feel heavier. Even with his body enhanced by the shadow, there was a limit to how much it could withstand. Sunny suspected that without the Blood Weave, he would have suffocated a long time ago.

What's worse, he felt as though he was getting closer and closer to the actual body of the unknown horror that had destroyed their vessel. He still couldn't sense its massive shape, but judging by the girth of the tentacles that surrounded him, the monster couldn't have been far.

And then, Sunny finally noticed something.

A short distance away from him, a small shadow was struggling against a much larger and ferocious one.

Cassie!

Gathering all his strength, Sunny swam toward the blind girl with as much speed as he could muster. As he drew near, he could discern the details of what was happening.

Cassie was being pulled down, a smaller tentacle coiled around her body. She was still struggling, trying to get free, but her movements were growing weaker with each second. She was suffocating.

Filled with fury, Sunny propelled himself forward and grabbed onto the tentacle, feeling slippery flesh throbbing in his grip.

If he had any choice, he would have avoided touching that thing at all costs. But fighting underwater was tricky… if he wanted to deliver any sort of a powerful blow, he had to find some form of support first.

Summoning the Midnight Shard, Sunny strained every muscle in his body and slashed across the tentacle, right below the point where it was coiled around Cassie's lower torso. He knew that he wouldn't be able to do any serious harm with that strike, which was slowed down to a crawl by the burdensome resistance of the black water.

However, his amazing sword was still sharp enough the cut into the fleshy tentacle, causing a cloud of dark blood to gush out of the wound.

The tentacle furiously twitched and shot sideways, as though trying to shake the attacker off. Flying through the darkness, Sunny held on for dear life and moved his blade upward, slicing the spongy flesh apart.

He never hoped to chop the tentacle off with one strike. No amount of strength would have allowed that to happen. Luckily, swords were able to pierce, slash… and cut.

Pushing the blade, Sunny cut deep into the tentacle. When the tsuba was about to touch the wound, he changed his grip and pulled the tachi down. The monster's flesh spread apart under the razor-sharp blade, barely offering any resistance.

A torrent of blood surged out, and with the last push, the tentacle was completely severed.

Sunny was finally able to turn his attention to Cassie to see how she was doing.

What he sensed made him scowl. The blind girl was barely conscious.

He needed to get her to the surface as fast as possible.

Pushing away the twitching remains of the tentacle, Sunny dismissed his sword and grabbed Cassie across the torso, feeling how cold her skin was through the thin fabric of her tunic.

Weakly, she tried to resist, not realizing that it was him and not the monster. Pressing the blind girl to his chest, Sunny turned his head up and felt a wave of desperation crashing against the walls of his mind.

His lungs were in agony, no air whatsoever left in them. His body was slowly losing its strength, full of terrible pain and thirsting for a breath of fresh air with maddening intensity. Even if he could see anything, at this point, his vision would have begun to darken.

And they were so, so far away from the surface.

What's worse, the horror of the depths was now alerted to his location. Countless tentacles were already moving, surrounding them in an impenetrable barrier of flesh. A second or two later, they would be crushed to death in the devastating embrace of the sea monster.

Sunny didn't know how to save them.

But he wasn't going to give up, no matter what.

Making an arduous stroke with his one free hand, he held tightly onto Cassie and swam up. The tentacles were approaching, blocking all paths of escape. Sunny gritted his teeth

and…

In the next moment, the water around them suddenly turned pure white.

An incandescent radiance filled a vast expanse of the cursed sea, obliterating any sign of darkness. The explosion of light was so intense that it pierced through Sunny's eyelids and hurt his eyes.

It was as though a miniature sun had ignited somewhere far below them, turning the endless black abyss into a pristine white void. Tidal currents of radiant water surged tumultuously, throwing the world into disarray.

The gargantuan tentacles convulsed and writhed madly, as though in the throes of unbearable pain. The unbreakable barrier of flesh fell apart.

Sunny wasn't about to let this chance go.

Straining his suffocating body, he swam to the surface, dodging the writhing tentacles. With the furious white sun burning in the depths below, he could see their shapes clearly. Moving faster and faster, he propelled himself up with everything he had left.

Sunny knew that surfacing that fast was dangerous, but there was no other choice. Both Cassie and himself did not have a lot of life left in them.

They needed air.

Although it seemed like an eternity, the white radiance began to dim just a few moments later. But it didn't matter. Sunny was already past the barrier of tentacles, swimming up with desperate speed.

He was afraid that they wouldn't make it. His consciousness was already beginning to wane, slowly slipping into the cold clutches of empty nothingness. Even knowing that there was nothing but water around, he was still overwhelmed by the suicidal desire to open his mouth and inhale as deeply as he could. His muscles were spasming, devoid of oxygen for too long.

…And then, finally, Sunny's head broke the surface. Blinded by pain, he drew in a gasping breath and coughed uncontrollably.

Held tightly in his arms, Cassie was doing the same. Her chest was ruggedly moving up and down, sucking in the sweet ambrosia of air. Sunny never knew how precious it was

before, not even while being slowly poisoned by the harmful, polluted air of the outskirts.

They made it.

Trying to compose himself, Sunny looked around. The last remnants of the white radiance were long gone, erased as if they had never existed. The world was once again consumed by absolute darkness.

However, far away in the east, the first light of dawn was about to shine from beyond the horizon.

Catching the glimpse of the giant stone hand, Sunny gripped Cassie's shoulders and swam in that direction.

Chapter-95: Starlight

Sunny felt that he was at the end of his rope. He had put himself through too much abuse during these last few days. Now, it was hard to even remember when was the last time he had slept.

A day before climbing the Soul Devouring Tree in search of a special fruit, perhaps.

Since then, he had lived through the harrowing torture of the Blood Weave transformation, spent countless hours on the verge of mental collapse to resist the effects of the enthrallment, mangled his hands to stay lucid, guided the boat through the terrors of the dark sea in absolute darkness, saw it being destroyed by the horrid dweller of the deep, and gave battle to that monster in the cold black depths, almost drowning as the result.

His body and mind were on the brink of shutting off.

Despite that, Sunny stubbornly continued to swim, bringing himself and Cassie closer and closer to the giant stone hand that was rising from the water, as though trying to embrace the skies.

The dark sea was surging around him, still reeling from the effects of the light explosion that had rocked it sometime earlier. Tall waves were threatening to drown the two Sleepers, throwing them around like toys. Struggling against them was a hard task.

And still, he persisted.

The dawn was drawing close, but for now, there was still nothing but cold, darkness and danger all around them. Any second, something could rise from the depths of the abyss and put an end to their desperate attempt to save themselves.

At least the tentacles were gone, perhaps scared away by the pain of being exposed to the searing light.

By some miracle, Sunny eventually managed to reach the stone hand.

Hoisting Cassie up, he helped her climb on the dark rocks and followed closely behind. Soon, they reached the open palm of the hand and crawled to its center, then fell down, utterly spent and exhausted.

For a long time, neither of them was able to talk. All Sunny could do was lay motionless, draw in raspy breaths, and try to stay awake.

His mind was empty of thoughts. That was fine, because he didn't want to think. If he did, he would be forced to remember… remember what had happened to…

'Shut up!'

What was the point of remembering? He couldn't change anything.

The sound of the black water crashing against the base of the giant hand reminded him that the night was still not over.

Opening his eyes, Sunny tried to understand their current circumstances.

Their shelter was slightly raised above the waves, the base of the giant thumb almost touching the surface of the dark sea. The palm was not very spacious, roughly half the size of the circular platform that had saved his life on his first day on the Forgotten Shore. It was angled upward, creating a slight slope.

The fingers were higher above waves and wide enough to accommodate a person, but they were bent upward toward the sky, making them less suitable to serve as a refuge.

'We need to get further away from the water.'

With that thought, Sunny tiredly stood up and bent down to touch Cassie's shoulder.

"Cassie. Stand up. We have to move higher."

His voice sounded hollow and brittle.

The blind girl flinched and raised her head, her skin deathly pale.

"...Sunny?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. It's me."

She was still in shock. Sunny could see that Cassie's mind was not all there yet, so he gently pulled her to her feet.

"Come on, let's go. It's just a few meters."

She lingered.

"What happened? I heard a… a sound… and then something was pulling me down…"

He gritted his teeth and tried to keep his tone even.

"We were attacked by a sea monster. The boat was destroyed. I dove down and managed to find you, then swam to this pile of stones. It's not very high above the water, so…"

Cassie wavered.

"Where's… where's…"

Sunny hurried to interrupt her, unwilling to answer the next question.

"Come, follow me. We can rest when we're higher."

Gently guiding the blind girl, Sunny climbed to the base of the giant hand's index finger, which was the highest point they could reach without climbing the fingers themselves. Sitting down on the cold stone, he rested his back against the giant phalanx and stared at the restless surface of the dark sea.

His eyes were cold and empty.

Cassie was silent by his side. Her pale face was contorted, as though she simultaneously wanted to ask the question and dreaded the answer.

Finally, gathering her courage, the blind girl whispered, her trembling voice barely audible:

"Sunny. Where is Neph?"

He stayed silent, not willing to speak the words out loud.

Stupidly, he felt that if he spoke them, they would become the truth. But if he didn't, there was still a possibility that they were a lie.

'I'm not answering.'

A few moments later, the familiar pressure appeared in his mind. The pressure grew and grew, making his head spin.

'I'm not!'

Then, the piercing pain came. Sunny stubbornly endured it. He lasted for much longer than he had ever done before, keeping his mouth shut until hot tears rolled from his eyes, his whole body shaking from the terrible suffering.

But eventually, he was still forced to say those bitter words.

"She's… she's g…"

Before he could finish, a subtle sound attracted his attention. It came from below, from the edges of the restless dark waves.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

Out there at the base of the giant thumb, where the cursed sea was almost touching its stone surface, a pale white hand appeared from the black water and grabbed onto the rocks.

Then, a tall figure slowly pulled itself onto the opened palm of the stone giantess.

His eyes widened.

Feeling that something was wrong, Cassie turned her head and asked:

"Sunny? What is it?"

He trembled and whispered, gripped with sorrow.

"It's Nephis."

An uncertain smile appeared on the blind girl's face.

"Neph?! She is alright?!"

Sunny found himself unable to answer.

No, Nephis was not alright.

In fact, he didn't know how she was even alive.

The Starlight Legion Armor was shattered and torn, revealing the mutilated flesh beneath. There was a horrifying gaping wound on Changing Star's torso, looking as though almost half of her right side was missing. Sunny could see the sharp shards of broken ribs, the rivers of blood streaming down her legs, and the mangled mess of viscera spilling over the edges of the wound.

He wanted to close his eyes.

Another large chunk of flesh was missing from her thigh, exposing the shredded remnants of muscle and the white surface of the femur, cracked and barely holding together. Her right arm was severely damaged, too. In fact, it was almost torn off, hanging only by a narrow strip of skin and a few tendons, like that of a mistreated, broken marionette.

Even her face was not spared. One of Neph's eyes was gone, its socket crushed and shattered, the skin of her cheek was shaved off as though by sandpaper, leaving behind a mangled mess of bleeding flesh and broken teeth.

The sight of her was harrowing and heartbreaking.

It was apparent that Changing Star was about to die.

"Sunny? Why are you not answering?"

He glanced at Cassie and bit his lip, trying once again to suppress the answer that was fighting its way out. Something sharp and hot was stabbing at his heart, making his vision blurry.

Meanwhile, Nephis staggered and blindly stepped forward. Her legs buckled, and she heavily fell to her knees, splattering blood all over the cold surface of the stone. A terrible moan escaped from her lips as her cracked femur finally shattered, bone piercing through muscle and skin.

Sunny felt as though he was thrown into his worst nightmare. He wanted to scream, but his voice was gone. A deep, almost physical pain was tearing him from inside.

He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to see this.

And yet, he couldn't look away.

…That's why he noticed instantly when two white flames ignited in Neph's eyes. The radiance grew brighter and brighter, spilling from her eyes, her mouth, the gaping wounds in her body. It was as though there was a flaming star burning in the place where her heart should have been, as though she was nothing but white flame hidden behind a thin layer of human skin.

The incandescent radiance filled Changing Star's blood, turning it into streams of liquid white fire.

As Sunny watched, frozen in place with his eyes opened wide, that fire began to melt and reshape her flesh. Slowly, her muscles repaired herself, her organs returned to their places, her bones reassembled themselves from the shards.

Where there was nothing to replace a missing part, the fire took its shape and solidified.

With a terrible scream, Nephis grasped her almost severed arm and tore it away, then pressed it to the stump that was bleeding with white flame. Soon, the mangled halves melted together, becoming whole again.

Shocked, he saw every terrible wound on her body heal, washed in the purifying fire.

Soon, there was nothing but pristine white skin showing through the wide gaps in the shattered armor.

Nephis raised her head, looking at them but not seeing anything. There was no recognition in her gaze, all understanding destroyed by the cruel crucible of the sacred fire.

Then the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan closed her eyes and fell to the ground, losing consciousness.

…Finally, the first rays of sunshine appeared from beyond the eastern horizon.

The dawn was coming.

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In the end, Nephis had remained unconscious for an entire two days.

On the third day, she finally opened her eyes and slowly rose, looking around with subtle confusion.

Her face, as usual, was calm and indifferent.

However, she did flinch a little when her gaze fell on Sunny, who was sitting at the top of the giant hand's index finger and grinning from ear to ear at her.

Frowning, Changing Star looked herself over, noticing the embarrassing gaps in her armor, and said:

"Why are you smiling?"

Sunny gave her a mischievous wink and shrugged.

"Look behind you."

Lingering for a few seconds, Neph sighed and turned around, wondering what is it that he wanted her to see.

Behind her, a dark expanse of land was rising above the slope of the colossal crater.

And on it, a tall city wall built of grey polished stone was towering over the giant chasm of the abyss. It looked ancient but still impenetrable, able to withstand the crushing pressure of the dark sea for a thousand more years,

They had made it.

They had found the human castle.

[End of volume one: Child of Shadows.]